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## **Paper**

A brief review of Secondary School Food Policy (SSFP) approaches in the UK from 2010 to 2022.

## **Abstract**

### ***Purpose***

The purpose of this brief review is to provide a snapshot of Secondary School Food Policy (SSFP) across the devolved nations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) to offer insights into a growing area of policy concern. The selected context of research is school food policy, an area of research which has received little attention in terms of policy approaches. The review is focused on 2010 to 2022.

### ***Design/methodology/approach***

This work combines interdisciplinary perspectives spanning across food policy, public health, psychology, education and sociology. This combination has merit as it offers different perspectives in terms of understanding school food policy. The study was conducted between August 2021 and March 2022, using a desk-based review, analysing policies on food in secondary schools. Data collection was conducted through the web using key search terms. The READ (Read, Extract, Analyse, Distil) approach was used as a systematic procedure to analyse policy and evaluation documents.

### ***Originality/value***

The current findings suggest that researching school food policy across nations has merit. There is a relative lack of focus on secondary schools, in light of England's focus on the National Food Strategy (focus on children), post-pandemic, economic crisis – together this makes school food and food policy a topic of real urgency and importance. Lessons can both be learned, particularly in promoting healthier and more educationally inclusive school food practices. Research in this area can inform curriculum design and school food environment and system changes from the perspective of learnings around taking a whole school food approach to education.

### ***Findings and recommendations***

To all levels of government, it is recommended that a coherent policy-making approach be employed to tackle SSFP improvements, to progress a whole school approach to food, supported by long term dedicated resources whilst engaging children in SSFP development. For education departments, it is recommended that a food curriculum review, connected to school meals alongside a refocus on school food standards monitoring and reporting is crucial in serving the future generations. The current economic crisis has had an impact on public spending. Universal Free School Meals has been said to make an enormous difference to wellbeing.

### ***Key words***

School food policy; UK; food education; school meals

### ***Paper type***

General review

## Introduction

This review paper provides a snapshot of Secondary School Food Policy (SSFP) across the UK. In order to foreground this review, it is important to highlight the context in health. Poor dietary choices formed early in childhood have been shown to continue into adolescence (Cristoph et al., 2019) and through adulthood, increasing the risk of non-communicable disease such as obesity (Lobstein et al., 2015), type 2 diabetes, and some cancers. The Health Promoting School (HPS) framework described by The World Health Organisation (WHO) emphasises a change in the setup of school systems towards health promotion environments whereby a whole school approach is adopted to: (i) produce social and physical environments which are healthy and conducive (ii) strengthen relationship with staff, parents and the wider community and (iii) embed health and wellbeing into the curriculum (World Health Organization, 2021a). Such discourses are wide spread and have global relevance. School meals make significant contributions to healthy dietary behaviour, but the UK system is varied and decentralised (Lucas et al., 2017). The UK lacks consistent policies and acknowledging the broader school eating environment would be beneficial and would help contribute to future school meals policy. However, the UK has a devolved government so this contributes to the lack of consistency. Specific school food environment policies can improve targeted dietary behaviours (Micha et al., 2018; Stallings, 2010).

### 1.1 Definition of Secondary School Food Policy (SSFP)

The topic of food in schools spans numerous domains including; education from curriculum subjects such as Design and Technology (D&T), Health Education and Home Economics, to broader topics such as healthy eating; feeding, including school meals standards, access to meals and eligibility, packed lunch and allergy policies, snack and vending machines, school events and celebrations and environments defined as the place and time where pupils obtain food, and the options available to them during school hours (Welker et al., 2016). In order to support children's development, healthy dietary preferences and dietary intake, four components need to be considered which include 1) the school community, 2) the school curriculum, 3) school environment and 4) school nutrition and health services to support the development of food and nutrition policy, within the Health Promoting Schools (HPS) framework (WHO, 2006).

School Food Policy (SFP) is discussed at a global level (WHO, 2006) and national level (Department for Education, 2021a). School Food Policy (SFP) includes, food and nutrition policy (Hirschman, 2013), whole school food approach (Food For Life, 2022), school food standards (Department for Education, 2021a), healthy eating policy, food and nutrition policy (WHO, 2021b), and school food environment (FAO, 2022). To understand the term SFP, it is useful to define *food policy*. According to Hawkes and Parsons (2019) food policy can be delivered across local to global levels of governance, can be specific or overarching, and can take various forms such as plans, strategies, guidelines, regulations and voluntary initiatives. Collectively, these shape who eats what, when, where and at what cost (Lang et al., 2009), in this case, at secondary school. Food policy also "spans a complex web of institutions, infrastructure, people and processes and is subject to the influences and interests of countless parties, all of whom compete for a role in shaping it" (Hawkes and Parsons, 2019, p. 2).

## 2.0 Methods

### Overview

The focus of this paper is to provide a brief review of Secondary School Food Policy (SSFP) across the devolved nations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) to offer insights into a growing area of policy concern. There is a need to review secondary school food policy separately to primary school given the differences in governance structures, curriculum and free school meal eligibility. The time period in focus is 2010 to 2022. However, due to the lack of literature within secondary schools on food policy, this paper also includes reference to primary schools. Our core research question was: *How does Secondary School Food Policy (SSFP) compare and differ across the UK within this time period?* In order to address this we used a desk based review of relevant literature and documents. To identify these, we searched via google, google scholar, scopus, researchgate, academia.edu, JSTOR, EBSCO and the following government pages: [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk), [www.gov.wales](http://www.gov.wales), [www.gov.scot](http://www.gov.scot), [www.nidirectgov.uk](http://www.nidirectgov.uk), using relevant key terms such as 'school food' and 'school food policy' and their variants together with geographic location terms (UK, England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales). Initial screening of documents involved policy documents and non-academic

documents, which were not peer-reviewed such as briefings, to search for published peer-reviewed literature. The terms identified here were used to determine relevance. As a team, we examined the references of key documents, which led to further documents being identified. The quality of the data was considered and we looked for peer-reviewed publications. In total, 142 documents were extracted for further reading and review. These papers were grouped by paper type, including academic papers and non-academic papers. This led to an output of a report totalling 50 pages, and 14,752 words. The research was funded by UKPRP, [GENIUS Network](#) and the report was produced for this purpose. The pool of relevant documents was varied and our extracted documents included research and policy documents, legislation on Free School Meals (FSM) eligibility, School Food Standards (SFS) and documents detailing food education provision in different curricula. The research approach combined interdisciplinary perspectives spanning across food policy, public health, psychology, education and sociology. The document search extraction was conducted between August 2021 and March 2022. The paper types included journal articles, government papers and research reports.

### **Analysis and search parameters**

The READ (Read, Extract, Analyse, Distil) approach (Dalglish et al., 2020) was used to analyse documents for this brief review. This method is typically used to understand qualitative policy research and this was useful for this brief review paper due to the inductive nature of this work. At the outset, research parameters were set in terms of the number of papers to review and search terms to help conduct the research. Key search terms included 'school food', 'school meals', 'school food policy' with 'England', 'Scotland', 'Wales' and 'Northern Ireland'. The exclusion criteria consisted of research and policy documents extending beyond these identified regions. The analysis involved reviewing relevant papers, extract relevant points to thematically develop an overview and learnings from each nation and its approach to school food policy. The whole team were involved in analysing data and this was done by continuous reviewing of documentation and writing up of the initial report.

### **Limitations**

This research did not come without its limitations. In terms of period of time, this work is focused on 2010 - 2022. Policy changes rapidly but it is much more manageable to conduct a general review of a shorter period. Methodologically, these include variation in education structure across nations, making direct school meals policy comparisons challenging and a lack of literature on SSFP available, making the review limited in scope. In order to mitigate such concerns, a robust approach was adopted to analyse the data for suitability. As a desk based study, the research questions were used to develop the structure of the report and subsequent brief review paper, but this creates a subjective stance to the research approach, but the only way to manage large datasets (Drisko and Maschi, 2016). It is difficult to know whether key sources and resources were missed, so this involved scanning relevant networks such as third sector organisations involved within the school food policy space.

## **3.0 School food policy in England**

National SFP in England's secondary schools spans: school meals, specifically policies on Free School Meals (FSM) and School Food Standards (SFS), packed lunch and breakfast clubs; education including D&T and RSE and HE, Science and GCSE curriculums. Each school's Board of Governors has a statutory responsibility to ensure provision of food at school. This applies to all local-authority-maintained schools, free schools and academies, non-maintained special schools and pupil referral units (Department for Education, 2015). Governors are not only responsible for 'creating and embedding a great school food culture' (Department for Education, 2021a), but are expected to increase uptake of school meals to improve school finances and ensure meals meet the School Food Standards through working with school leadership (Department for Education, 2021a).

### **3.1 School meals policy**

The Education Act (1996) stipulates that maintained schools and academies (including free schools) must ensure disadvantaged pupils (between 5 and 16 years old) have access to FSM (Department for Education, 2018). Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) were introduced as a grant for academies and free schools in England, regardless of financial and socio-economic status (Department for Education, 2023). These are available to children whose parents receive Universal Credit, Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Support via Immigration and Asylum Act

1999, the guaranteed element of Pension Credit, or Child Tax Credit if household income does not exceed £16,190 annually. Due to changes in the rollout of the social security Universal Credit system, existing recipients of FSM remain eligible until the end of their education. This is checked by the recipient's school using the Eligibility Checking System (The Education Act, 1996). Since the pandemic, free school meal eligibility has been temporarily extended to include some children who have no recourse to public funds (Department for Education, 2021b).

### 3.2 School food standards

The Requirements for School Food Regulations (2014) is the policy in England that ensures all food provided to pupils is high quality and nutritious, promotes healthy eating behaviour and good health (Long et al., 2021). Similar to FSM policy, standards apply to 'all LA maintained schools, pupil referral units, academies that opened before 2010, academies and free schools with agreed funding from June 2014, non-maintained special schools' (Long et al., 2021, p. 6). Academies open since 2010 with funding agreements prior to June 2014 do not have to comply but it is expected that these schools voluntarily meet standards (Long et al., 2021).

Governing bodies, responsible for SFS in each school, have the autonomy to decide the form that school lunches take, but these and all other food and drink in school must meet SFS. If the Local Authority [LA] or a private catering company is the provider, SFS compliance should be included in the contract, and evidence of meeting standards provided. If school meals are provided by the school, they must produce evidence of compliance for their governing body. There is an expectation that the governing body regularly reviews SFS reports, and school meals take up work as well as working with school leaders to develop a whole school food policy (Department for Education, 2021a). This includes setting out the school's approach to its provision of food; food education (including practical cooking); the role of the catering team as part of the wider school team; the school's strategy to increase the take-up of school lunches (Department for Education, 2021a).

There has been a long-standing debate regarding a lack of SFS monitoring by national or local government (School Food Matters, 2022). A report by youth campaign group BiteBack2030 (2022) found through panels with secondary school children across England, that schools are not adhering to all SFS. Participants mentioned confectionery, processed meat products and fried foods to be regularly available at school, and how healthier options often cost more and are excluded from meal deals. They call for a coherent accountability mechanism to be put into place to ensure SFS are monitored (BiteBack2030, 2022). In 2022, the UK government Levelling Up white paper announced a number of commitments to school food including; encouraging schools to publish on their website the actions taken to support a whole school approach (WSA) to food, with the view to becoming mandatory policy; a pilot with local authorities to measure SFS compliance; £200,000 of training support for governors to support a WSA to food and; £5 million for teacher training (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022).

### 3.3 SSFP in England: A review of literature

Academic literature regarding English SSFP is broad in nature, focused on school meals and SFS. Significantly less research exists about secondary school food education policy. Papers regarding school meals include historical analysis of provision across all schools in England (xxxx ; Rose et al., 2019; Gustafsson, 2003); cost benefit analysis (Nelson, 2013); analysis of nutritional contribution of school meals in primary and secondary (Nelson *et al.*, 2007); nutritional comparison of secondary school meals versus packed lunches (Stevens *et al.* 2013); exploration of factors influencing English secondary schools decisions relating to vending machines (Devi et al., 2010); the impact of COVID-19 on meeting secondary school food provision (Rose et al., 2021); impact of secondary school meal and environment modifications on classroom behaviour (Storey et al., 2011) and; examining the links between secondary school meal take up and attainment (Nelson et al., 2015).

A number of papers focus on SFS. An implementation and evaluation since 2000 across devolved nations of the UK, by Adamson et al., (2013) found re-introduction of SFS was fragmented but where school food improvements were made, nutritional and quality improvements were seen. An evaluation of the impact of SFS on children's diets found limited impact of food and nutrition standards on the total diet of 11–12-year-olds (Spence et al., 2014). Investigation into whether nutritional standards were met in 3 secondary schools, found 2 out of 3 did not meet SFS and that SFS alone would not shift children's preferences (Gould et al., 2006). An analysis of pupil's meal choice and preferences in relation to SFS and FSM discovered sandwiches

and pizza as most popular, recommending student preferences be incorporated into policymaking (Ensaff et al., 2013). School food and nutrition policies were reviewed by Guy's and St Thomas Charity (2020) and it was found that whilst the awareness of the School Food Standards appeared to be high, many schools reviewed did not have an overarching food policy, whilst others were not fully implementing existing policies. Research into FSM examined factors that influence FSM take up, and found food quality and choice alongside school proactiveness as barriers (Sahota et al., 2014). Finally, an analysis of whether children eligible for FSM during Covid-19 lockdowns could access them found half of eligible children were not in receipt of any FSMs one month after lockdown (Parham et al., 2020).

#### **4.0 School food policy in Scotland**

##### **4.1 School meals policy**

Scotland's education structure differs to the rest of the UK, as secondary school year groups do not correspond with school years in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, therefore affecting where SFP applies. In Scotland, compulsory secondary education runs from S1 to S4, the latter being the equivalent to Year 11 when pupils sit National 5's (equivalent to GCSE examinations in England). S5 and S6 are optional and equivalent to Year 12 and 13 (Education Scotland, 2022).

National SSFP in Scotland covers both school meals, (FSM, SFS) and education. The Healthy Eating in Schools Guidance (Scottish Government, 2021a) explicitly connects the food offered during school with the curriculum, stating it 'uses evidence-based information to complement the learning children and young people receive about Health and Wellbeing through Curriculum for Excellence' (Scottish Government 2021a, p. 10). This builds on the Better Eating, Better Learning (Scottish Government, 2014) guidance which calls on all school stakeholders to collaborate in making school food and food education improvements, involving strategic working partnerships across education, agricultural, health departments and local government. The context and role of food in school as discussed in the *Better eating, better learning* paper (Scottish Government, 2014), highlights policy related to school food, and its impact on the school system and the wider health, economic, education and environment domains in Scotland.

The Standards in Scotland's Schools Act (2000) stipulates education authorities managed and grant-aided schools must be health promoting. This is defined as providing 'activities and environment and facilities, which promote the physical, social, mental and emotional health and well-being of pupils in attendance at the school' (Standards in Scotland's Schools Act 2000). The Education (School Lunches, Scotland) Regulations (2015) sets out criteria for children who are entitled to FSM, which is then implemented by local councils. Those eligible for FSM include families on Universal Credit, Income Support, income-based Job Seeker's Allowance, income-based Employment and Support Allowance, support under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, Child Tax Credit, but not Working Tax Credit, and a person's income is less than £16,105, both Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit and have an income of up to £7,500' (Education Scotland Act, 1980). In 2021, funding of £21.75 million was announced by The Scottish Government to provide support during school holidays to those on FSM for approximately 145,000 primary and secondary children until Easter 2022 (Scottish Government, 2021b).

##### **4.2 School food standards**

Statutory school food and drink standards were introduced to secondary schools in 2009, with revisions aimed at reflecting current health evidence (Scottish Government, 2021a). The Healthy Eating in Schools guidance includes standards for both foods served as part of a school analysed lunch and food provided at 'all other times of the secondary school day including the non-analysed school lunch and for example breakfast clubs, vending machines, mid-morning break, tuck shops and after school clubs' (Scottish Government, 2021a, p. 57). These standards apply to any food and drink offered to children when at school, at all times of the day, including 'lunchtime, the secondary school hostel evening meal, breakfast clubs, tuckshops, vending machines, mid-morning services, community cafés serving children and young people during the school day, before/after school clubs and nurture clubs' (Scottish Government 2021a). Anyone involved in providing children with food, including headteachers, school staff, holiday club providers, caterers and fundraising event teams is considered responsible for food and drink standards. Amended in 2021 in response to supply chain issues related to the Coronavirus pandemic, it gives clear expectations for education authorities and managers about how to continue to comply with school meal regulations. Food standards have also been

updated in relation to changes in dietary guidance (Scottish Government, 2021).

School meal monitoring in Scotland is ordinarily undertaken by members of the Health and Nutrition Inspection team, part of Education Scotland, to support schools to become health promoting and comply with nutritional legislation. Since Covid-19, this team has been deployed to support organisations, local authorities and government in a wide range of projects including school food self-assessment, school food provision troubleshooting, and policy guidance (Education Scotland, 2022).

#### 4.3 SSFP in Scotland: A review of literature

Limited literature specific to Scotland's SSFP exists and is focused on school meals, particularly linked to school food environments outside the school gates, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Bryant et al (2023) attempt to understand school food systems to support food based policies and interventions. Ellaway et al., (2012) analyse whether obesity promoting food environments gather around Scottish secondary schools and Crawford et al., (2017) assess the nutritional quality of popular secondary lunchtime 'out of school' foods. Macdiarmid et al., (2015) discovered through interviews and questionnaires how, what and where food is purchased, and motivations for secondary school children choosing to purchase food out of school. Other research includes papers on the contribution of secondary school meals to children's nutrient intake (Norris et al., 2016); investigation into features associated with FSM take-up (Chambers et al., 2016); analysis of sugar sweetened drinks during the school day (Hamilton and Wills, 2017) and examination of the impact of Scottish regional schools health promotion policy on secondary pupils' knowledge, attitudes and behaviour (Porciani, 2013).

### 5.0 School food policy in Wales

National SSFP in Wales spans school meals, specifically policies on FSM and School Food Standards (SFS) and education. Notably the Welsh education inspectorate Estyn guidance gives "a prominent place to the inspection of pupils' wellbeing" (Estyn, 2017, p. 2) and inspectors are tasked with ensuring that school governors report on school meal arrangements and explain how they promote healthy eating to parents. They are expected to ask pupils how they think school encourages them to eat healthily and report on how the school promotes healthy living. However, they are not required to report on school food quality. Additionally, under the teaching and learning experiences section of the framework, the balance and breadth of the healthy living curriculum may also be evaluated (Estyn, 2017).

#### 5.1 School meals policy

Wales' school meals policies include school food standards and FSM. Guidance in Healthy Eating for Maintained Schools in Wales states that everyone from local authorities to Head Teachers, those working in schools, parents, caterers and health professionals are responsible for healthy eating. It is statutory guidance for LAs and school governing bodies. Notably, if parties decide to depart from the Healthy Eating in Schools (Wales) Measure (2009) they must have good reason for doing so (Welsh Government, 2014). Under The Free School Lunches and Milk (Universal Credit) (Wales) Order (2019), children from families who receive a range of benefits including income Support Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, Income-related Employment and Support Allowance Child Tax Credit, provided, annual income does not exceed £16,190 and those on Universal credit are eligible for FSM.

In 2021, the Welsh government committed to rolling out FSM to all primary school pupils, demonstrating its commitment to reducing inequalities and raising the profile of healthy diets (Welsh Government, 2021) and intend to do so by 2024. During the Coronavirus pandemic, guidance was issued to ensure that those entitled to FSM maintained access to food provision even if the school was closed (Welsh Government, 2020).

#### 5.2 School food standards

Welsh school meals policies include the broader Healthy Eating in Schools Wales Measure (2009) and more specific Healthy Eating in Schools (Nutritional Standards and Requirements Wales Regulations, 2013). Local authorities and governing bodies are expected to promote healthy eating and drinking to school pupils and encourage take up of school meals. They are tasked with ensuring children entitled to FSM access them, and protect their identity. Specifically, these parties are charged with considering guidance: "(a) on what constitutes healthy eating and drinking, (b) on appropriate action to promote healthy eating and drinking, (c)

on how principles of sustainable development are to apply in relation to the promotion of healthy eating and drinking” (Healthy Eating in Schools Wales Measure, 2009). How a school has been promoted as healthy must be covered in the governors annual report. Schools are expected to consider a range of issues such as time allocation for meals and the social interaction of eating with others, how children are involved in decision making regarding food choices and the whole-school approach is applied to school food policy, such as lunchbox policies. Pupils must have relaxed access to fresh water for drinking. This policy also expects schools to take a joined-up policy approach, with a strong emphasis on health and well-being throughout the whole school curriculum and mealtimes. The policy also lays out how schools should consider the impact of sustainable development on healthy eating, explaining how “Sustainable development is about enhancing the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of people and communities, achieving a better quality of life for our own and future generations” (Welsh Government, 2014, p. 5).

### 5.3 SSFP in Wales: Review of literature

Research into SFP in Wales predominantly focuses on school meals, covering the history of the school meal service (Grigg, 2020), a review of contract catering specifications in supporting healthy lifestyles in school after the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering (Whelan et al., 1995) and nutritional and ecological footprint analysis to examine the impact of food served in Cardiff’s secondary schools (Fairchild and Collins, 2011). Grey literature by the Wales Audit Office (Holownia and Harries, 2010) examines the cost of school meals.

Two papers were found to examine SFS. Addis (2019) analysed the barriers for implementation of school meal nutritional guidelines through interviews with stakeholders. Then Addis and Murphy (2019) looked into the impact of this legislation on school food practices in Wales and found through pupil focus groups that adolescent preferences, identities and social needs are overlooked. Regarding education, Addis (2016) reviewed schools’ plans for food education and found timing, teacher training and teaching methods as key areas for review.

## 6.0 School food policy in Northern Ireland

### 6.1 School Meals Policy

National SFP in Northern Ireland spans school meals, specifically policies on Free School Meals (FSM), School Food Standards (SFS) and education. In 2013, a joint Food in Schools policy was launched by the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Department of Education, 2022).

Advocating a whole school approach to food, the policy connects the consumption of food in schools with food education to develop healthy eating skills and knowledge (Department of Education, 2013). Grant-aided schools must “adopt a whole-school approach to food and nutrition; comply fully with the Nutritional Standards for School Lunches and the Nutritional Standards for Other Food and Drinks in Schools; Ensure that pupils have easy access at all times to free, fresh drinking water; Provide for education in the curriculum in relation to nutrition and healthy eating from foundation stage until key stage 4; Provide education in Home Economics to all pupils at key stage 3, and opportunities to explore ways to develop a healthy diet and to develop practical skills in the safe, hygienic, healthy and creative use of food” (Department of Education, 2013, p. 3). It also explicitly recognises that a consistent message is needed so that healthy eating knowledge from the classroom is consistently reflected in the school eating experience, supported by practical food skills development.

Uniquely this policy is linked to other policy work such as The Ten-Year Strategy for Children and Young People and Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Northern Ireland 2012-2022 : A Fitter Future for All (Department of Education, 2013). As part of the whole school approach to food and nutrition, it states that schools consider a wide range of topics such as food on offer (including nutrition, access and cost), packed lunches, quality of eating experience, education, practical food skills development, staff training needs, parental involvement and advertising in schools.

Amendment to The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order (1986) (Department of Education, 2017) ensures children from families who receive Universal Credit with earnings below £14,000 a year get a free school lunch. This is also applicable to those on Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance, Child Tax Credit taxable amount less than £16,190, those who get

support through the Immigration and Asylum Act and children with statement of special educational needs who needs a special diet, or board at a special school. In March 2020, at the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic, the government announced a fortnightly direct payment scheme for children in receipt of FSM, paying £2.70 per child per day for term time days when schools were closed (Department of Education, 2020).

### 6.2 School food standards

In January 2020, the Department of Education launched a public consultation on proposed updates to Nutritional Standards for School Food closing March 2020 (Department of Education, 2020). No further updates have been found. Existing SFS in Northern Ireland, which came into effect in 2007/8 are split into Nutritional standards for school lunches and Nutritional standards for other food and drinks in schools (Department of Education, 2011).

### 6.3 SSFP in Northern Ireland: A review of literature

Limited literature exists about SSFP in Northern Ireland and what exists covers school meals and food education. Conference proceedings examine whether school meals in Northern Ireland meet English standards for nutrients (McGuffin et al., 2014), the service was reviewed after standards were removed in 1980 (Evason and Woods, 1989). Education research focuses on the purpose, aims and pedagogical approaches of the Home Economics curriculum (McCloat and Caraher, 2020a), whilst McGuffin (1978) reviewed health education over 40 years ago and McMullan (1989) reviewed curriculum development in Home Economics in post-primary education to determine the subject's scope and future. Therefore, the published literature on food education is limited.

## 7.0 Discussion

### 7.1 School meal policy across devolved nations

Each country has similar FSM policy and eligibility criteria, although Wales uniquely highlights the need to protect the identity of children claiming FSM and some inconsistencies across devolved nations. England has adopted UIFSM for children up to year 2 (age 7). The Scottish Government introduced UIFSM for all children in primaries 1 to 3 (P1–3), up to 8 years old. All primary school children in Wales will get free school meals by 2024. Policy responses to COVID-19 in each country addressed the issue of those reliant on FSM accessing replacements during school closures, but each country took a different approach in terms of FSM eligibility, school food standards and curriculum.

Each country has a range of exemptions, which consistently include parties, cultural events, fundraising events and food brought in from home (McIntyre et al., 2022). No countries in the UK have packed lunch policies, despite research confirming packed lunches are frequently less healthy than a school meal (Stevens et al., 2013), and leave management of this relationship with parents to school leaders. For example, in Scotland policy recommends using the mandate for the school being health promoting as an opportunity to encourage consumption of permitted foods in packed lunches (Scottish Government 2021a).

Responsibility for SFS sits with school Boards of Governors across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This is also the case for all secondary school types including Academies. They are also often responsible for school meal provision and increasing school meal take up. In England governors are also expected to develop a good school food culture, whilst in Wales, governors are expected to report on how the school promotes healthy eating in annual reports (Food Foundation, 2023). In Scotland, education authorities and school managers have a duty to comply with nutrient regulations. In Wales and Scotland policy also considers anyone involved in providing children with food as influential on child health and recommends they consider SFS.

Contrasting this, SFS monitoring is approached differently in each country. In England, there is no monitoring of SFS, although government announcements in 2022 indicate a pilot between the department for education and the Food Standards Agency. In Wales, the education inspectorate is explicitly engaged in food in schools (Estyn, 2017), with an inspection framework which gives prominence to the inspection of pupils' health and wellbeing. They are tasked with reporting in all reports, what schools do to promote healthy eating, but not the quality of school meals (Estyn, 2017). An alternative approach is taken by Education Scotland who employed a team of Health and Nutrition Inspectors to support healthy promoting schools policy implementation although these are currently deployed to other projects (Education Scotland, 2022). In

Northern Ireland between 2006-11, SFS were overseen by nutritionists employed by the Education and Training Inspectorate, although it has now been withdrawn.

## **7.2 SSFP Recommendations**

Many lessons can be drawn from this research and policy recommendations based on insights are given below for a range of stakeholders. To all levels of government, we recommend:

- A joined up, coherent policy-making approach be employed to tackle the improvements needed in SSFP. Although, there is one example of a Food in Schools Forum which exists in Northern Ireland. School food policy overlaps significantly with departments in education, health and social care, agriculture, children and families, public procurement across national, devolved and local governments, as policies made in one department may have unintended consequences in another jurisdiction. An example is England's draft strategy on sustainability and climate change that includes plans for food waste monitoring in education, how to make school meals sustainable and increase climate change education in the curriculum;
- All departments involved in SSFP champion and work to progress a whole school approach (WSA) to food, specifically bringing consistency between school meals and food education as is the aim in Wales. Lessons can be learnt from Scotland's systems approach where school food policy is centrally located within and connected to Scottish environment, education, economic and health domains;
- Long-term dedicated resources, such as investment in training teachers and caterers, SFS monitoring implementation, and expertise in SFS development, to support policy implementation;
- Engagement of children in policy development, as the customers in receipt of services, and in support of a WSA to food;
- Nations lacking school breakfast club policies could review the need and benefits of a dedicated policy to ensure all children have access to a free, healthy breakfast;
- Nationwide WSA training for school stakeholders including governors, head teachers, local authorities, caterers and school staff to ensure a consistent approach to SSFP is implemented. This could help reduce inconsistencies in how individual schools deliver SSFP (Jamie Oliver Food Foundation, 2017);
- A set of working paper case studies have been published (WFP, 2022) which focus on school food across England (xxxx; xxxx), Scotland (Brennan et al, 2022), Wales (Brophy and Woolley, 2022) and Northern Ireland (xxxx). These are excellent reference points for context when developing and informing policy decisions.

## **7.4 In devolved departments for education, we recommend:**

- Policymakers review food education offers to ensure it delivers the aims of the National Curriculum to equip pupils for life. This includes establishing food education's increased prominence in school inspection, to provide all children with the same food education regardless of the school they attend, an issue highlighted by Jamie Oliver Food Foundation (2017) and an aim of the curriculum;
- A review of food curricula across mandatory secondary education to ensure all children are equipped with the skills and knowledge to live as healthy citizens for life, in addition to equal career opportunities in the food, health and hospitality industries. Policymakers should also consider development of entry level qualifications in food;
- Policymakers consider explicitly connecting school meals and food with broad subjects in the curriculum, as in Wales and Northern Ireland through the use of cross curriculum topics. This could ensure that even those children who do not take food qualifications continue their food education until the end of mandatory education;
- A refocus on SFS monitoring and evaluation across all nations, and effective embedded implementation of SFS monitoring, given each nation addresses this differently. Inspiration for policymakers could be drawn from Wales's education inspectorate commitment to school food and child health or the announcement of England's Food Standards Agency SFS monitoring project in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2022) white paper. SFS exemptions (for example using food as rewards, packed lunch policies, and fundraising) are reviewed, as called for by

- Jamie Oliver Food Foundation (2017), to drive consistency to school healthy eating messaging;
- A SFS review and implementation every 5 years to keep recommendations up to date with current science;
- A review of school food policy at both primary and secondary level across the UK would be helpful to support in developing and understanding more about the contextual issues to inform future school food policy;
- Consideration of universal free school meals to reduce inequalities, raise the profile of a healthy school lunch, especially when research shows packed lunches lack nutritional content. Policy examples exist in Brazil's national school feeding programme (Sidaner et al., 2013) and in Finland where children from preschool through to 16 years old receive a free school lunch. A healthy lunch is seen as essential to child wellbeing, reducing inequalities and an integral part of the Finnish national curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). These are being introduced in very few UK schools.

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### **Ethics**

Ethical approval was sought from the xxxx for this research project. BERA (2018) ethical guidelines were adopted to ensure a robust ethical framework.

### **Disclosure statement**

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