

Reforming School Meals in England

Responding to the UK Government's 2026 School Food Standards Overhaul — a strategic white paper for schools, governors, and catering leads navigating the new landscape.

WHITE PAPER

2026 POLICY REFORM

Executive Summary

In April 2026, the UK Government announced significant reforms to school food standards, targeting the removal of high-sugar and deep-fried foods from school menus. These changes aim to improve child health outcomes, reduce obesity, and establish consistent nutritional standards across all schools in England.

Policy Changes

Removal of high-sugar and deep-fried foods, with mandatory nutritional standards introduced across all schools.

Delivery Models

In-house, outsourced, and hybrid catering options assessed for compliance and operational fit.

Infrastructure & Financing

Capital investment requirements explored, including leasing as a flexible financial tool for schools.

Strategic Recommendations

Practical guidance for implementation across operations, governance, and finance.

Policy Context and Drivers for Change

The reforms are driven by escalating public health concerns that have reached a critical threshold. Schools are identified as a pivotal intervention point, providing up to one-third of a child's daily caloric intake.

The Scale of the Problem

1/3

Children Overweight

Around one-third of children leave primary school overweight or obese.

#1

Hospital Admissions

Tooth decay is the leading cause of hospital admissions in children aged 5-9.

Why Schools Matter

Schools represent a uniquely powerful intervention point in a child's dietary development. With children spending the majority of their waking hours in school, the food environment created there shapes long-term habits and health outcomes.

Schools provide up to one-third of a child's daily caloric intake, making them a critical lever for improving public health outcomes at scale.

— School Food Plan, 2013

Key Policy Changes

The 2026 reforms introduce sweeping changes across four core areas, applying to all schools in England — including academies and free schools — from the Department for Education.

1

Removal of Unhealthy Foods

- ◆ Ban on all deep-fried foods
- ◆ Removal or significant reduction of high-sugar items
- ◆ Restrictions on heavily processed "grab-and-go" foods

2

Nutritional Standards

- ◆ Mandatory inclusion of fruit and vegetables
- ◆ Mandatory inclusion of whole grains
- ◆ Reduced frequency of sugary desserts

3

Governance & Accountability

- ◆ Appointment of a school food lead governor
- ◆ Mandatory publication of menus and food policies
- ◆ Monitoring and enforcement mechanisms from 2027

4

Scope of Application

- ◆ All schools in England
- ◆ Academies and free schools included
- ◆ No exemptions for existing catering contracts

Source: Department for Education, 2026

Implications for Schools

Compliance with the new standards will require coordinated action across operations, infrastructure, and school culture. The British Nutrition Foundation recommends a "whole school approach" that integrates nutrition education, student engagement, and behavioral interventions.



Operational Requirements

- Redesign menus to meet nutritional standards
- Train staff in fresh food preparation techniques
- Adjust procurement strategies and supplier relationships



Infrastructure Needs

- Modern cooking equipment such as combination ovens
- Increased refrigeration and cold storage capacity
- Food preparation space for fresh ingredients



Cultural Change

- Embed nutrition education across the curriculum
- Engage students meaningfully in food choices
- Implement behavioral interventions to shift habits

Delivery Models for School Meals

Schools must choose a catering model that balances compliance, quality, cost, and operational capacity. Three principal approaches are available, each with distinct trade-offs.

IN-HOUSE CATERING

- Full Menu Control
- Align with School Ethos
- High Flexibility
- (Costs: High Upfront
- Staff Complexity)



OUTSOURCED CATERING

- Reduced Admin Burden
- Specialist Expertise
- Predictable Costs
- (Control: Reduced Contract Limits)



HYBRID MODEL

- Combine Flexibility & Expertise
- Balance Control and Cost
- Suits Partial Kitchens



i Some schools are successfully combining both in-house and outsourced approaches — retaining flexibility and direct oversight for key meal components whilst leveraging external expertise for specialist preparation or high-volume periods.

In-House vs Outsourced: A Closer Look

Option A: In-House Catering

Advantages

- Full control over menus and compliance
- Alignment with school ethos and values
- Greater flexibility and responsiveness to pupil needs

Disadvantages

- High upfront capital costs for equipment
- Staffing, HR, and training responsibilities
- Significant operational complexity

Option B: Outsourced Catering

Advantages

- Reduced administrative and management burden
- Access to specialist catering expertise
- More predictable and manageable costs

Disadvantages

- Reduced direct control over food quality
- Contractual limitations on menu changes
- Risk of cost-driven decision-making by provider

- ☐ The right model depends on each school's existing infrastructure, staffing capacity, budget, and strategic priorities. A thorough catering audit is strongly recommended before committing to any single approach.

Infrastructure Strategy: Leasing and Capital Investment

Compliance with the 2026 standards may require significant kitchen upgrades. For many schools, the capital investment required — covering cooking equipment, storage systems, and kitchen redesign — presents a substantial financial challenge.

Leasing as a Financial Tool

Leasing enables schools to access the equipment they need without the burden of large upfront capital expenditure. Under Department for Education "Class Consent" guidance, schools may enter leasing arrangements where assets are necessary for operational delivery, agreements represent value for money, and risks are appropriately managed. Catering equipment meets these criteria as a core operational requirement.



Improved Cash Flow

Spread costs over time rather than depleting reserves in a single year.



Higher-Quality Equipment

Access to premium combination ovens and refrigeration that would otherwise be unaffordable.



Bundled Maintenance

Many leasing agreements include servicing and maintenance, reducing unexpected costs.



Easier Upgrade Cycles

Replace equipment at end of lease term to stay current with evolving standards.

Leasing vs Purchasing: A Comparison

When planning capital investment in kitchen infrastructure, schools must weigh the relative merits of leasing against outright purchase across several key dimensions.

Factor	Leasing	Purchase
Upfront Cost	Low — spread over the lease term	High — full capital outlay required
Flexibility	High — terms can be structured to suit	Low — asset is fixed once acquired
Maintenance	Often included in the agreement	Additional cost, school's responsibility
Upgrade Cycle	Easier — replace at end of term	Slower — requires new capital decision
Balance Sheet Impact	Operational expenditure	Capital expenditure
DfE Compliance	Permitted under Class Consent guidance	Standard procurement rules apply

- ✓ Research indicates that well-managed scratch cooking can be cost-neutral. Waste reduction and seasonal sourcing are key levers for long-term financial sustainability — Soil Association, 2022.

Implementation Recommendations & Conclusion

The 2026 reforms represent a major shift in school food policy, requiring coordinated action across operations, finance, and governance. Schools that invest proactively will be best positioned to deliver improved health outcomes and long-term sustainability.

1

Audit

Conduct a full catering and infrastructure audit to establish baseline and identify gaps.

2

Plan

Select the right delivery model and develop a capital investment plan including leasing options.

3

Govern

Appoint a food lead governor and ensure full transparency, menu publication, and compliance.

4

Deliver

Invest in staff training, engage pupils in food choices, and embed nutrition across school culture.

Schools that invest in modern facilities, choose the right delivery model, and use flexible financing such as leasing will be best positioned to deliver improved health outcomes and long-term sustainability.

References

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