



School Foods Standards Consultation Stakeholder Guidance

Introduction

This document is intended to provide guidance to stakeholders completing the official government consultation on School Food Standards, running until 12 June 2026. These guideline answers have been produced by The Vegan Society's Registered Dietitians and other Policy Team members. They reflect and include the latest evidence on these issues. This guidance does not cover every question asked in the consultation, focussing on those most relevant to vegans and plant-rich diets.

Background

The School Food Standards set requirements for the food provided in local authority maintained nurseries, primary and secondary schools and academies, with the goal of ensuring that pupils are eating healthy foods. The current standards have been in place since 2014 and do not reflect the best modern dietary evidence and knowledge. The government has now updated them and is seeking views on the proposed new standards from people or organisations with an interest in school food, including teachers, school managers and governors, nutrition professionals and parents.

The new standards are a significant step forward in supporting pupils to eat plant-based foods, as well as in other areas of health, such as cutting down fat, salt and sugar intake. Unlike the current standards, they do not require schools to serve meat, instead saying that pupils' protein needs can be met through plant-based foods, and in particular pulses. Schools are now free to completely replace meat with pulses on their menus if they choose to. The standards also support plant-based alternatives to dairy products, but do not make providing these compulsory. They also set some restrictions on meat "alternatives".

The new standards should significantly improve the availability of plant-based foods in schools. However, they do not guarantee that the nutritional needs of vegan children will be met.

The consultation

Consultation is via an online form. There are 41 questions, in total (including those about the submitter). It is not necessary to answer every question.

The government's consultation page is [here](#):

<https://consult.education.gov.uk/school-food-policy-team/school-food-standards-updating-the-leg-framework/>

The deadline for submissions is 11.59pm on Friday 12 June 2026.

If you have any questions, please contact us at policy@vegansociety.com.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

10. To what extent do you agree with the new rules about which foods and drinks can be offered at breakfast clubs before the school day begins?

Agree

Please explain why you answered in this way

Schools should be supported with resources and training to ensure breakfast offerings include plant-based, high-fibre options such as porridge, wholemeal toast with suitable spreads and fortified cereals. These choices are not only health-promoting due to the nature of whole plant foods being rich in fibre, complex carbohydrates and essential micronutrients (Oppenlander & Totton 2023), but can also be enjoyed by all learners regardless of dietary belief, thereby promoting an inclusive and equitable food culture.

Similarly, clear guidance should be issued to ensure that fortified, unsweetened plant-based milk alternatives are offered as a matter of course and meet nutritional standards, particularly with respect to calcium and vitamin B12 content (see Q21).

11. Do you think processed meat should be permitted to be served at breakfast?

No.

The World Health Organisation classifies processed meat as a Group 1 carcinogen to humans:

'In the case of processed meat, this classification is based on sufficient evidence from epidemiological studies that eating processed meat causes colorectal cancer.' An analysis of data from 10 studies estimated that every 50-gram portion of processed meat eaten daily increases the risk of colorectal cancer by about 18%.' (WHO 2015)

A 2025 evidence update by the independent Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) to the UK Government found that processed meat consumption is associated with a variety of adverse health outcomes including increased risk of Type 2 Diabetes, high blood pressure, colorectal cancer and overall mortality. SACN recommends that consumption of red and processed meats, as well as processed foods high in saturated fat and salt, should be reduced (SACN 2025).

15. To what extent do you agree with the requirement to serve a portion of vegetables and/or salad with all grab and go main meals?

Strongly agree

Please explain why you answered in this way

The latest UK National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS) finds that children in the UK are not meeting recommendations of at least 5 portions of varied vegetables and fruits daily. For children aged 11-18, the average is 2.8 portions, and only 9% achieve the '5 A Day' goal (NDNS 2025). More servings of vegetables will increase fibre intake.

17. To what extent do you agree to the proposed list of permitted drinks in primary schools?

Agree.

Please explain why you answered in this way

The inclusion of non-sweetened and fortified soya and oat drinks is very welcome. These drinks provide important nutritional value, in particular for children who do not drink dairy milk (especially soya, due to its protein content being comparable to dairy milk). In 2025, the UK's Committee on Toxicology (COT) and the Scientific Advisory

Committee on Nutrition (SACN) concluded that these alternatives (when non-sweetened and fortified, as specified in the standards) are an acceptable and safe alternative to cow's milk for primary school-age children (COT-SACN 2025: Blomhoff et al 2023).

Provision of these drinks also ensures the needs of vegan learners, and those who do not drink dairy milks for other reasons, are met.

18. To what extent do you agree to the proposed list of permitted drinks in secondary schools?

Agree

Please explain why you answered in this way

The inclusion of non-sweetened and fortified soya and oat drinks is very welcome. These drinks provide nutritional value - especially soya due to its protein content being comparable to dairy milk. In 2025, the UK's Committee on Toxicology and Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition concluded that these alternatives are an acceptable and safe alternative to cow's milk for primary school-age children (SACN/COT 2025: Blomhof et al 2023).

Provision of these drinks also ensures the needs of vegan learners, and those who do not drink dairy milks for other reasons, are met.

Q21. To what extent do you agree with the proposed changes to the dairy and plant-based requirements?

Agree

Please explain why you answered in this way

Provision of suitably fortified non-sweetened plant drinks provides nutritional value without some of the risks associated with dairy products, such as a higher intake of saturated fat. They also can have specific advantages, in reducing some lipids and cholesterol and in particular increasing fibre consumption (Del Carmen et al 2025). According to the latest National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS), targets for fibre consumption are only being sufficiently met by 22% of 1 to 3 year-olds, 14% of 4 to 10 year-olds, and just 4% of 11 to 18 year olds (NDNS 2025).

However, the standards must be amended so that these drinks *must* be served, as is the case with dairy milks, rather than that they *can* be served, as the current draft states. Learners who do not drink dairy milk must always have the option of similar-style drinks containing protein and the identified fortified ingredients.

The same principle should apply to healthy desserts such as fruit-based dishes or fortified plant-based and vegan-suitable yoghurts with fruit, which must be available wherever dairy-based options are offered. Having these options is important to meet energy and calcium needs for vegan learners. These should be readily available and presented in a way that encourages uptake across all groups (BDA 2023).

Not having these drinks and desserts provided puts vegan learners at risk of disadvantage in comparison to learners who do consume dairy products (see also Q39). Veganism is protected under the European Convention on Human Rights and is a protected philosophical belief characteristic under the Equality Act 2010, which protects “religion or belief”. Schools (and nurseries) under local authority control must also comply with the Public Sector Equality Duty (Section 149 of the Act) which requires them to have due regard for the need to eliminate discrimination, including for taking steps to remove or minimise disadvantage, meet the needs of protected groups, create equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between people with protected characteristics and those without (see Q39).

Consuming plant-milks as part of a healthy, balanced diet can also be beneficial for other children through its contribution to increased fibre intake (see Q17). As expanded upon in Q29, plant-based options should be provided as the default offering on menus, rather than being positioned as an alternative to dairy milks. Evidence shows that this encourages the consumption of plant-based foods (Kwasny et al 2022; Tirion 2022).

Finally, although it is not administered by the Department for Education and Skills (DES), the current subsidy of dairy milk in schools provided by the School Milk Subsidy Scheme disadvantages those who do not drink dairy milks (HM Government 2024). Equivalent financial support for plant-based milk alternatives should be provided and DES should raise this issue with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) which is responsible for the scheme.

23. To what extent do you agree with the new rules restricting the serving of cheese?

Strongly agree

Please explain why you answered in this way

Vegetarian meals should prioritise beans and pulses as protein sources, as they are a good source of fibre and low in fat. They are also more inclusive than meals containing cheese, as they can be suitable for vegan learners, and learners who avoid dairy milk products for other reasons.

24. To what extent do you agree with the plan to restrict the serving of cheese as a main protein option in secondary schools, in stages?

Strongly agree

Please explain why you answered in this way

Vegetarian meals should prioritise beans and pulses as protein sources, as they are a good source of fibre and low in fat. They are also more inclusive than cheese, as they can be suitable for vegan learners and learners who do not consume dairy for other reasons.

29. To what extent do you agree with the changes being suggested for pulses being included alongside main menu items at least once every week?

Agree

Please explain why you answered in this way

Beans and pulses provide high-quality plant protein, a variety of micronutrients and fibre. Currently only 4% of children in the UK get enough dietary fibre. Including pulses more regularly and often on school menus, as well as fruit, vegetables and wholegrains, will help more children to reach their fibre needs (NDNS 2025). A serving of pulses also counts towards children's '5 A Day' goal. Only 14% of primary-aged children meeting their fibre needs and only 9% are achieving their '5 A Day', consuming an average of 2.8 portions of fruit or vegetables daily (NDNS 2025). Beans and pulses are therefore highly supportive of improved nutritional health outcomes.

When used to replace meat in dishes, beans and pulses also reduce the saturated fat content of meals, and the consumption of red and processed meat, which is again aligned with UK public health goals (NHS 2020).

Beans and pulses have lower environmental footprints than animal-based foods (Scarborough et al 2023), as well as usually being more inexpensive per portion. However, as things stand in the current draft, they might only be served as part of a non-vegetarian menu as little as once a week.

The most effective way to increase the uptake of beans and pulses, without sacrificing individual choice, is to provide at least one entirely plant-based meal centred around beans and pulses daily.

We also recommend these plant-based and vegan-suitable meals - comprised of vegetables, pulses, beans or other plant-based proteins - be the default or prioritised option on the menu, not niche or secondary choices. Academic studies and evaluation by users and providers of real-world interventions indicate that this approach increases uptake of plant-based options (Kwasny et al 2022; Tirion 2022). Catering provider Sodexo (which serves more than 500 schools in the UK) found that a suite of nudge-type measures to improve uptake of plant-based options in hospitals, including menu presentation changes, led to average amount of meat served per patient reduced by 14%, while plant protein servings increased by nearly 50%. The pilot also found high levels of diner satisfaction were maintained throughout (Sodexo 2026).

A number of other case studies have found that measures to engage children in dietary change increase openness to and uptake of healthy plant-based foods (The Food Foundation 2023; ProVeg 2024; Soil Association 2025). In addition to increasing learners' benefit from the nutritional impact of increased fruit and vegetables, as well as a quality source of plant protein, measures such as this set a strong foundation for lifelong healthier behaviours.

30. To what extent do you agree with the plan to increase pulses in secondary schools in stages?

Agree

31. To what extent do you agree with the changes being suggested for protein in school menus?

Agree

Please explain why you answered in this way

Ending the requirement in the existing standards for meat and dairy products to be provided is very welcome. This gives schools the option of meeting all protein requirements through the provision of beans and pulses (in addition to other plant-based protein sources such as mycoprotein, tofu and soya mince), including having entirely plant-based menus if they choose and if these otherwise meet the standards.

In contrast, eating red and processed meat is associated with a range of health harms, including significantly increased risks of Type II diabetes, cardiovascular disease (Guo et al. 2022), kidney disease, various cancers, particularly colorectal cancers, and all-cause mortality (Charlebois & Pantopoulos 2023, Jin et al. 2024).

The standards at present provide no guidance on other minimally processed plant-based protein sources such as tempeh and seitan, which should be explicitly permitted, as is the case with tofu.

The proposals should go further in encouraging the uptake of healthy plant-based dishes. As detailed in Q29, an effective measure is to provide plant-based options as the default on menus, rather than as an option for vegetarian/vegans or an alternative to meat-based dishes. Evidence indicates that this measure will increase the uptake of plant-based foods (Kwasny et al 2022; Tirion 2022; The Food Foundation 2023; Soil Association 2025). In a trial of measures in UK hospitals, catering provider Sodexo was able to reduce the average amount of meat served per patient by 14%, while plant protein servings increased by nearly 50% (Sodexo 2026).

Care should be taken to ensure that the measures intended to improve nutrition for the general school population do not inadvertently lead to poor provision of attractive and nutritious food for vegan learners and others who do not consume some or all animal products. For instance, substitution of only a portion of meat within a dish with beans and pulses will prevent learners who do not eat any meat consuming the meal. For vegan learners and others, at least one hot, nutritious plant-based and vegan-suitable meal should be available every day as standard.

The restriction on “vegetarian or plant-based products which are marketed as meat alternatives (manufactured or homemade)” to two portions a week does not have a basis in nutrition, and instead treats foods as unhealthy on the basis of their marketing.

Current evidence is that there is no direct link between ill health and ‘ultra-processed’ plant foods such as burgers and sausages, unlike processed animal meat products which do show an association (Del Carmen et al 2025; SACN 2025). It is the case that processed, plant-based meat alternatives may have high levels of fat, salt and sugar which are unhealthy, so the standards should ensure the use of “meat alternatives” which have a healthy nutritional profile. Wholefoods such as beans and pulses should be prioritised and be at the centre of main meal provision, but in addition, the use of alternatives such as plant-based burgers and sausages which have healthy nutritional profiles (saturated fat <1.5g/100g, salt <0.3g/100g, total sugars <5g/100g) may encourage more learners to take up healthy plant-based options.

33. To what extent do you think the proposed changes will improve the nutritional quality of school meals?

To some extent

39. What concerns, if any, do you have about the potential impact of these proposals on all individuals with protected characteristics?

Veganism is protected under the European Convention on Human Rights and is a protected philosophical belief characteristic under the Equality Act 2010, which protects “religion or belief”. Schools (and nurseries) under local authority control must also comply with must also comply with the Public Sector Equality Duty (Section 149 of the Act), which requires them to have due regard for the need to eliminate discrimination, including for taking steps to remove or minimize disadvantage, meet the needs of protected groups, create equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between people with protected characteristics and those without.

The proposals represent a significant improvement on the previous food standards as the outcome is likely to be greater provision of food suitable for vegans. The standards do not currently, however, ensure that vegan learners will be provided with suitably nutritious options every day.

To ensure vegan learners' needs are properly taken into account, some changes must be made. Firstly, as noted in the answer to Q21, unsweetened and fortified plant-based milk substitutes should be made compulsory rather than optional. Secondly, wherever dairy-based desserts such as yoghurts are provided, plant-based versions should also be available. Thirdly, at least one nutritious, fully plant-based/vegan-suitable hot meal option should be provided daily.

Separately to, but relevant to the School Food Standards, the current subsidy of dairy milk provided by the School Milk Subsidy Scheme disadvantages vegan children and others who do not drink dairy milks. Equivalent financial support for plant-based milk alternatives complying with the requirements of the School Food Standards should be provided (see Q21).

40. Do you think the new School Food Standards could have any positive and/or negative effects on the environment?

Plant-based foods have in most circumstances significantly lower environmental footprints than animal-based foods (Rockstrom et al 2025). A 2023 study published in *Nature Food* concluded that in the UK, “plant-based diets produce 75 percent less heat-trapping gas, generate 75 percent less water pollution, and use 75 percent less land than meat-rich diets” (Scarborough et al. 2023). The UK’s Climate Change Committee has recommended significant reduction in consumption of animal products in order to achieve Net Zero, including meat by 35% by 2050, ‘red meat’ (e.g. cattle and sheep) by 40% by 2050, and milk products by 20% by 2035 (Climate Change Committee 2025).

Specifically in regard to schools, a recent study showed that replacing animal protein for plant-based proteins including legumes, tofu and minimally-processed plant-based products, could roughly halve the environmental impacts of school lunch recommendations while preserving macronutrient profiles (Benito-Cobeña et.al., 2025).

The greater provision of plant-based foods can therefore be expected to reduce environmental impacts, while additional measures to promote them as outlined in this submission will provide even greater positive impact. Sodexo’s actions promoting plant-based meals in 35 hospitals (see Q31) led to a 22% reduction in food-related greenhouse gas emissions over the trial period (Sodexo 2026). Greater provision and availability of plant-based food will also help to normalise plant-based meals and may encourage learners to consume more outside school, having a further positive effect.

41. Do you have any further comments you would like to share with us?

Consumption of healthy plant-based foods can be encouraged through a number of measures. To make plant-based meals genuinely appealing, they must be co-developed with learners and rooted in familiar, culturally appropriate ingredients. Involving learners in the naming and design of dishes has been shown to increase uptake and reduce waste. For example, Hampshire County Council's Catering Services (HC3S) achieved positive results by engaging learners in developing plant-based menu items (The Food Foundation 2023).

ProVeg UK's School Plates programme also demonstrates how schools can deliver nutritious, affordable and attractive meals. In the London Borough of Waltham Forest, partnering with ProVeg led to greater openness among both staff and learners to healthy, plant-based choices, showing that appealing food and inclusive provision can go hand in hand (ProVeg UK 2024).

Barriers are less about learners' preferences and more about how beans and pulses are cooked and presented, and how confident kitchen staff are in preparing them. Organisations such as ProVeg UK and Plant Based Schools have worked with schools to embed plant-based options into menus, demonstrating that inclusive food provision need not impose additional financial burdens on local authorities or catering teams (ProVeg UK 2024; Plant Based Schools 2023).

It is important that caterers, chefs and suppliers are fully trained and able to produce cost-effective, healthy, enjoyable plant-based foods, and in particular bean and pulse-based dishes, in order to encourage learners to eat them, provide value for money and reduce food wastage. The government should facilitate this skills development through providing platforms and networks for skill sharing.

It is also important that health professionals such as dietitians fully understand the nutritional implications of the more extensive use of plant-based foods and are able to support caterers in developing more plant-based menus.

Because beans and pulses are almost always cheaper than animal-based proteins, increasing the proportion of plant-based foods consumed in schools can also help to reduce catering costs. A 2024 study of catering in universities found that food costs for plant-based meals were on average 30% cheaper than meat-based meals (Nicholles & Bryant 2024). Savings can be redirected to support educational provision.

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