

## **A history of school food in Scotland**

School meals in Scotland have been part of school life since the development of compulsory education in 1872. Today there are over 53 million school meals served every year in just under 2,700 schools in Scotland. School food is regarded as an integral part of education valued for providing access to good food and nutrition for young people while also delivering a multiple dividend for society through its social, environmental and economic potential.

The emergence of school meals arose from three fundamental priorities: the inability of undernourished children to learn effectively; concerns for the health and wellbeing of children who would become the country's future working population, and; fears for the health of conscripts entering the armed services during the turbulent period that stretched from the Boer War in 1880 to the second world war ending in 1945.

In 1906, the government allowed local authorities to provide free school meals for poor children. School meal provision was later made compulsory through the [1944 Education Act](#) which made it a statutory duty rather than an optional service for local authorities to provide. By 1945 school meals were described as having 'a vital place in national policy for nutrition and well-being of children' and became a key part of the creation of the welfare state. The school meals service became a general service for all children, with government funding covering 95 per cent of the cost of providing the meals.

In an era of school meal deregulation and in a shift of thinking about the role of the service, the statutory duty was reversed by the [1980 Education \(Scotland\) Act](#) which removed the obligation on local authorities to provide school meals, except for children entitled to free school meals, and abolished the need for meals to meet any nutritional standards. Free milk provision was also made discretionary rather than obligatory.

Later the [1988 Local Government Act](#) required 'Schools, Welfare and Other Catering' meals to be the subject of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT), obliging local authorities to open the provision of meals to market testing. To some degree this led to a greater efficiency in the processes of service delivery but unfortunately cost reduction and the arbitrary provision of high fat, sugar and salt food options at the expense of fresh food, good nutrition and education became the norm. This was manifested in: increased use of pre-prepared and processed food; a loss of kitchen infrastructure in schools, and; fewer catering staff with reduced skills.

Entitlement to free meals fell as a result of [The Social Security Act of 1986](#) which removed an entitlement to free meals for thousands of children although there were improvements in 2003 and again in 2009 when entitlement was extended to a larger number of children and young people who were, or whose parents or carers were, in receipt of welfare benefits.

Growing concerns about Scotland's poor endemic health - much of which is diet related resulting in increasing health costs - coupled with a change in consumer attitude about food quality, provenance and production methods gave rise to concern about public sector catering, especially in schools.

In 2002 the then Scottish Executive convened an expert panel on school meals ahead of the rest of the UK and produced a seminal report with recommendations in [Hungry for Success – A Whole School Approach to School Meals in Scotland](#). This was internationally acknowledged for reinventing school food as a health and wellbeing and educational service rather than simply a commercial trading activity. The Scottish Government also insisted that all Scottish schools should be health promoting by 2007.

Hungry for Success (2003) was designed to improve the quality and take-up of school meals. The recommendations foremost included the introduction of new Scottish nutrient standards for school lunches for all special and primary schools by 2004 and all secondary schools by 2006. The implementation of the recommendations was backed with £137 million of ring-fenced funding between 2003 and 2009 which was later consolidated within the block grant to local authorities.

In 2007 the [Schools \(Health Promotion and Nutrition\) \(Scotland\) Act](#) and the [Nutritional Requirements for Food and Drink in Schools \(Scotland\) Regulations 2008](#) were enacted to consolidate the achievements of Hungry for Success. The nutritional standards set out in the 2008 Regulations subsequently superseded the Hungry for Success recommendations according to the best nutritional science. The new statutory basis for school food also introduced requirements to consider sustainability when purchasing food, a duty to increase uptake of school meals and, in order to eliminate any stigma, a duty to protect the identity of those entitled to free school meals. This ground breaking legislation for the better health and wellbeing of young people has been further reinforced with Scotland's first [National Food and Drink Policy \(2009\)](#). This deals with food in a holistic way and seeks to promote Scotland's sustainable economic growth and create the levers of change that address quality, health and wellbeing, and environmental sustainability. In effect it aims to revalue food across society.

[The Scottish Curriculum for Excellence](#) launched in 2010 recognises the significance of food in schools. It is a forward looking, coherent curriculum for young people of 3-18 years that provides Scotland's children with the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for life in the 21st century. Food education has an important role to play in helping young people make healthier life choices and ensuring they are more aware of the impacts of food and the importance of eating sustainably.

Linking school food to food education is the essence of the whole school approach. Through food education the aim is to produce behavioural change so that young people will as second nature opt for choices that are better for their health and the environment, not only in school but in their future lives.

[Better Eating, Better Learning – A New Context for School Food](#), 2014, sets the agenda for the coming decade to drive further improvements in school food and food education.

1906

- In 1906, the government allowed local authorities to provide free school meals for poor children. School meal provision was later made compulsory set out in the 1944 Education Act, which made it a statutory duty rather than an optional service for local authorities to provide.

1945

- By 1945 school meals were described by as having 'a vital place in national policy for nutrition and well-being of children' and became a key part of the creation of the welfare state.

1980

- In an era of school meal deregulation and in a shift of thinking about the role of the service, this statutory duty was reversed by the 1980 Education (Scotland) Act which removed the obligation on local authorities to provide school meals, except for children entitled to free school meals, and abolished the need for meals to meet any nutritional standards. Free milk provision too was made discretionary rather than obligatory.

1986

- Entitlement to free meals fell as a result of The Social Security Act of 1986 which removed an entitlement to free meals for thousands of children though this was improved in 2003 and again in 2009 with entitlement being extended to a larger number of children whose parents were entitled to welfare benefits.

1988

- The 1988 Local Government Act required 'Schools, Welfare and Other Catering' meals to be the subject of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT), obliging local authorities to open the provision of meals to market testing. This manifested in increased use of pre-prepared and processed food; a loss of kitchen infrastructure in schools; and fewer catering staff with reduced skills.

2003

- Hungry for Success - A Whole School Approach to School Meals in Scotland was designed to improve the quality and take-up of school meals. School meals is redefined as a Best Value service not simply a commercial trading activity.
- The recommendations foremost included the introduction of new Scottish nutrient standards for school lunches. The implementation of the recommendations was backed with £137 million of ring fenced funding between 2003 and 2009 to improve the quality of food, training, curricular links and infrastructure. The funding was later consolidated within the block grant to local authorities.

2007/08

- The Schools (Health Promotion and Nutrition) (Scotland) Act and the Nutritional Requirements for Food and Drink in Schools (Scotland) Regulations 2008 were enacted to consolidate the achievements of Hungry for Success with new the nutritional standards according to the best science set out in the 2008 Regulations.

2009

- This ground breaking legislation for the better health and wellbeing of young people has been further reinforced with Scotland's first National Food and Drink Policy (2009) which deals with food in an holistic way and seeks to promote Scotland's sustainable economic growth and create the levers of change that address quality, health and wellbeing, and environmental sustainability, in effect aiming to revalue food across society.

2014

- Better Eating, Better Learning - A New Context for School Food' launched. This guidance sets the agenda for the coming decade to help drive further improvements to school food and children and young people's learning about food and its contribution to their overall health and wellbeing.