

Setting the Table nutritional standards and practical guidance for early learning and childcare providers in Scotland

Report of the Technical Working Group on the review of nutrient, food and drink standards for children aged 1 up to 5 years

Contents

1. Background	1
2. Technical Working Group	2
2.1 Remit	2
3. Membership.....	2
4. Summary of changes to standards.....	3
4.1 Nutrient standards	3
4.2 Food and drink standards.....	3
5. Nutrient standards.....	4
5.1 Revised energy and nutrient standards	4
5.2 Rationale for revised energy and nutrient standards.....	6
6. Food and drink standards	9
6.1 Revised food and drink standards.....	9
7. Rationale for revised food and drink standards	15
8. Sample menus and analysis.....	17
9. Recommendations from the Technical Working Group	17
10. Annex: Nutrient standards split by meal occasion	18

1. Background

[Setting the Table](#) (STT) is a guidance document which provides standards for food and drink provision within early learning and childcare provision in Scotland. The guidance aims to ensure that children aged 0–5 years in childcare settings across Scotland are offered meals, snacks and drinks that meet their nutritional requirements and are conducive to good health. The guidance was first published in 2015, however a summary of major amendments was added in 2018 to reflect policy changes and evidence updates at that time.

The Scottish Government (SG) led a review of the STT guidance to ensure that it provides the most up to date, evidence-based advice and guidance for the sector. As part of this, a Technical Working Group was convened with the remit to review the nutrient, food and drink standards for children aged 1 up to 5 years. SG were responsible for leading the review of all other areas of the STT guidance.

The revised nutrient, food and drink standards reflect a number of recommendations published by the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) since 2015 on [Carbohydrates and Health](#), [Saturated Fats and Health](#) and [Feeding young children aged 1 to 5 years](#). They are also intended to support achievement of the [Scottish Dietary Goals](#), which describe, in nutritional terms, the diet that will improve and support the health of the Scottish population.

Sample menus were created and nutritionally analysed to ensure that the nutrient, food and drink standards could be met. These sample menus have been included within the updated STT guidance.

2. Technical Working Group

2.1 Remit

The remit of the Technical Working Group (TWG) was to:

- Undertake a review of the nutrient, food and drink standards for children aged 1 up to 5 years in the STT guidance.
- Provide evidence-based recommendations for revised nutrient, food and drink standards for children aged 1 up to 5 years in the updated STT guidance, taking into consideration the recommendations from SACN for children aged 1 to 5 years, and any other relevant SACN recommendations.

The primary focus of the TWG was the health and wellbeing of children aged 1 up to 5 years. The recommendations for the nutrient, food and drink standards are based on the consensus view of the current science and evidence base in relation to diet and health.

3. Membership

Claire Hislop (Chair)	Public Health Scotland Organisational Lead –Food and Physical Activity
Yvonne Traynor	Public Health Scotland Health Improvement Manager
Dominika Bugajska	NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde Community Nutritionist
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Laura Wilson	Food Standards Scotland Head of Public Health Nutrition
Gillian Fraser	Food Standards Scotland Senior Public Health Nutrition Advisor
Catherine McMahon (secretariat)	Public Health Scotland Senior Health Improvement Officer

4. Summary of changes to standards

4.1 Nutrient standards

Key changes to the nutrient standards are:

- One set of standards for children aged 1 up to 5 years, which are based on the age group with the highest nutritional requirements (i.e. 1-2 or 3-4 year olds).
- Standard for energy updated to reflect the [SACN Dietary Reference Values for Energy](#).
- Total fat standard updated to maximum of 35% of energy.
- New standards added for saturated fat, fibre and folate.
- Standard for non-milk extrinsic sugars replaced with free sugars.
- Standards for vitamin D and water removed.

4.2 Food and drink standards

Food group standards have been replaced with more specific food and drink based standards. A comparison of previous and revised standards are summarised in table 1 below.

Table 1 – Comparison of previous and revised food and drink based standards

Previous Standards (8)	Revised Standards (14)
Group 1: Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods	1. Fruit and vegetables
Group 2: Fruits and vegetables	2. Oily fish
Group 3: Meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein	3. Red and red processed meat
Group 4: Milk and dairy foods	4. Yoghurts and fromage frais (including non-dairy alternatives)
Foods high in fat	5. Sweetened and baked products, puddings and desserts (including dairy and non-dairy alternatives)
Foods high in sugar	6. Breakfast cereals
Foods high in salt	7. Fried foods
Drinks	8. Savoury snacks
	9. Bread and bread rolls
	10. Savoury pastry and pastry products
	11. Oils and spreads
	12. Salt, other condiments and preserves
	13. Confectionery
	14. Drinks

5. Nutrient standards

5.1 Revised energy and nutrient standards

A full menu of a main meal, two light meals, two snacks and drinks should provide around 90% of the energy and nutrient requirement for a child in full-time childcare (approximately 10 hours/day).

Energy requirements are split across the following eating occasions:

- Light meal, e.g. breakfast provides 20% of a child's energy requirement.
- Snack, mid-morning provides 10% of a child's energy requirement.
- Main meal, e.g. lunch provides 30% of a child's energy requirement.
- Snack, afternoon provides 10% of a child's energy requirement.
- Light meal, e.g. tea provides 20% of a child's energy requirement.

Where these meals and snacks are provided within the setting, the remaining 10% of a child's energy requirements will be provided at home.

Table 2 provides the energy and nutrient standards for 30% of a child's requirement and details how these were derived. Refer to annex for nutrient standards split by meal occasion.

Table 2 – Revised nutrient standards for a main meal providing 30% of daily energy and nutrient requirements

‘U’ denotes updated standard ‘N’ denotes new standard

Nutrient	Basis of standard	Min/ max	Unit	Highest requirement of 1-2 or 3-4 year olds
U - Energy	30% of Estimated Average Requirement	N/A	Kcal	369
U - Total fat	No more than 35% of energy	Max	g	14.4
N - Saturated fat	No more than 10% of energy	Max	g	4.1
Carbohydrate	Around 50% of energy	Min	g	49.2
N - Free sugars	No more than 5% of energy	Max	g	4.9
Protein	30% of Reference Nutrient Intake (RNI)	Min	g	5.1
N - Fibre (AOAC)	At least 30% of the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition recommendation for children aged 2 to 5 years	Min	g	4.5
Vitamin C	Not less than 30% of RNI	Min	mg	9
Vitamin A	Not less than 30% of RNI	Min	mcg	120
Iron	Not less than 30% of RNI	Min	mg	2.1
Calcium	Not less than 30% of RNI	Min	mg	120
Zinc	Not less than 30% of RNI	Min	mg	1.7
N - Folate	Not less than 30% of RNI	Min	mcg	25.5
Salt	No more than 30% of the SACN recommendation	Max	g	0.75
Sodium	No more than 30% of SACN recommendation	Max	mg	300

5.2 Rationale for revised energy and nutrient standards

One set of standards for children aged 1 up to 5 years

There is now one set of standards for children aged 1 up to 5 years (i.e. up to 60 months). This is a change to the previous standards which had standards for 1 to 3 and 4 to 5 year olds. Having one set of nutrient standards is more straightforward for early years childcare providers who wish to analyse their menus, and this is consistent with the approach taken in the school food regulations in Scotland.

Basing standards on children aged up to 60 months aligns with the ages included in the [SACN feeding young children aged 1 to 5 years \(2023\)](#) report. It was acknowledged that there could be children in these settings aged above 60 months, however this is likely to be a very small proportion.

The new standards are based on children with the highest nutritional requirements (i.e. 1-2 year olds or 3-4 year olds). Iron is the only nutrient where 1-2 year olds have a higher requirement than 3-4 year olds.

The updated STT guidance acknowledges that children have varied appetites which can also depend on their age and stage of development, meaning portion sizes should be adjusted accordingly.

Energy

The standard for energy has been calculated using the estimated average requirements as stated in the [SACN Dietary Reference Values for Energy \(2011\)](#) report.

Total fat and saturated fat

The standard for total fat is set at no more than 35% of energy. This is a change to the previous standards where total fat was set at no more than 40% of energy for 1 to 3 year olds, falling to 35% for 4 to 5 year olds. In addition, a new standard for saturated fat has been added. This reflects recommendations in the [SACN Feeding young children aged 1 to 5 years \(2023\)](#) report which states that the government considers advising that current population dietary guidelines apply from around age 2 years. The new standard for saturated fat is set at no more than 10% of energy, which reflects the recommendations proposed and agreed by SACN ([as stated in the minute of the June 2024 main SACN meeting](#)) with regards to Dietary Reference Values for macronutrients. The TWG agreed that the fat and saturated fat standards should apply from age 1 year as no negative implications could be identified of this approach.

Protein

The protein standard has been calculated based on the reference nutrient intake (RNI), as stated in the [Department of Health Dietary Reference Values for Food Energy and Nutrients for the United Kingdom \(1991\)](#) report, which is consistent with the approach taken in the previous standards. This approach aligns with the recommendation in the [SACN Feeding young children aged 1 to 5 years \(2023\)](#) report that the government considers approaches to reducing excess protein intakes towards the dietary reference values for children aged 1-5 years.

It is important to note that calculating the protein standard based on the RNI does not equate to 15% of energy (which in practice would be required to meet 100% of energy requirements if fat is 35% of energy and carbohydrate is 50% of energy). However, the standard for protein is a minimum, and could therefore be exceeded to ensure energy requirements are achieved.

Carbohydrate, free sugars and fibre

The carbohydrate standard continues to be set at a minimum of 50% of energy.

A new standard for free sugars replaces the previous standard for non-milk extrinsic sugar, and is set at 5% of energy which reflects the recommendation in the [SACN Carbohydrates and Health \(2015\)](#) report.

A new standard for fibre (AOAC) has been added and has been set based on the recommendation in the [SACN Carbohydrates and Health \(2015\)](#) report.

Whilst the [SACN Feeding young children aged 1 to 5 years \(2023\)](#) report recommends that intakes of free sugars should apply for age 1 year, the recommendations for total carbohydrate and fibre apply from age 2 years. However, the TWG were comfortable with the carbohydrate and fibre standards applying from age 1 year, as no negative implications could be identified for consumption at this level. Furthermore, the guidance states that increasing higher fibre foods should be done slowly.

Folate

A new standard has been added for folate. This has been calculated based on the RNI, as stated in the [Department of Health Dietary Reference Values for Food Energy and Nutrients for the United Kingdom \(1991\)](#) report. The rationale for adding this standard is that it aligns with encompassing other micronutrients within the standards, and is also consistent with the approach taken in the [School Food Regulations in Scotland](#).

Vitamin A, Vitamin C, Iron, Calcium and Zinc

No changes have been made to the standards for vitamin A, C, iron, calcium and zinc. They continue to be calculated based on the RNI's as stated in the [Department of Health Dietary Reference Values for Food Energy and Nutrients for the United Kingdom \(1991\)](#) report.

Salt and sodium

The standards for salt and sodium continue to be based on the recommendation in the [SACN Salt and Health \(2003\)](#) report.

Vitamin D

The standard for vitamin D has been removed as the main source of vitamin D is sunlight. It is only found in a small number of foods and it is therefore difficult to get enough from foods that naturally contain vitamin D and/or fortified foods alone. In addition, it is recommended that children aged under 5 years take a daily supplement containing 10 micrograms of vitamin D all year round.

Water

The standard for water has been removed as it is captured within the standard for drinks

6. Food and drink standards

6.1 Revised food and drink standards

The changes and additions to the food and drink standards for children aged 1 to 5 have been summarised below. In addition to these standards, the following advice is included within the guidance to support menu planning:

- All meals should provide at least one serving from the starchy food group.
- All meals (excluding breakfast) should provide one serving from the beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat, and other proteins group. However these foods can also be served at breakfast.
- Cheese should only be served as the main protein source twice per week across lunch and tea.

1. Fruit and vegetables

Previous Standard

A main meal shall provide a minimum of two servings of food from the fruit and vegetable group, excluding fresh fruit juice. At least one serving must be vegetables. A light meal shall provide at least one serving of fruit or vegetables

Revised Standard

Main meal - At least two portions of vegetables should be provided. Where a dessert is provided, a portion of fruit should always be an option.

Light meal - A fruit and/or vegetable portion should be provided.

Snack - A fruit and/or vegetable portion should be provided. Dried fruit should not be provided at snack occasions.

2. Oily fish

Previous Standard

Oily fish shall be provided once every week

Revised Standard

Main meal - Oily fish should be provided at least once every three weeks.

Light meal and snack - Oily fish should be provided once a week across light meal or snack on the weeks when it is not provided as a main meal.

.....
Oily fish should be limited to a maximum of twice per week.

3. Red and red processed meat

Previous Standard

Avoid or limit meat products and highly processed foods (e.g. sausages, pies, bought beef burgers) to a maximum of once a week.

Revised Standard

Main meal and light meal - Red and red processed meat should be limited to a maximum of three times per week, one of which can be red processed meat, but at no more than one meal occasion per day.

Snack - These foods should not be provided at snack occasions.

4. Yoghurts and fromage frais (including non-dairy alternatives) - *New

Previous Standard

No standard

Revised Standard

All meals and snacks - Only plain and unsweetened yoghurts or fromage frais can be provided.

5. Sweetened and baked products, puddings, and desserts (including dairy and non-dairy alternatives)

Previous Standard

Home baking recipes should be reviewed to reduce fats and added sugar and include more fruit. Home baking/bakery products can be offered as mini-servings, e.g. 30 g (matchbox size) as an accompaniment to fruit as a dessert

Revised Standard

Main meal and light meal - Sweetened and baked products, puddings and desserts (including dairy and non-dairy alternatives based desserts) should be limited to a maximum of three times per week, but at no more than one meal occasion per day. If combination dishes are provided e.g. crumble and custard, this would be classed as one serving. It is important that the serving size reflects one portion.

Snack - These foods should not be provided at snack occasions.

6. Breakfast cereals - *New

Previous Standard

No standard

Revised Standard

All meals and snacks

Only breakfast cereals meeting the following criteria can be provided:

- No more than 15g of total sugar per 100g
 - No more than 440mg sodium per 100g
 - No more than 1.1g of salt per 100g
 - At least 3g of fibre per 100g
-

7. Fried foods

Previous Standard

Deep frying should not be used as a cooking method. Products that have been deep fried during the manufacturing process, such as fishcakes, should be limited to once per week and on different days to ensure that children attending on the same day each week are offered variety

Revised Standard

Main meal and light meal - Fried foods should be limited to a maximum of once per week. This includes any product which is fried in the manufacturing process. Chips, if provided, should be served as part of a meal. Deep frying should not be used as a cooking method.

Snack - These foods should not be provided at snack occasions.

8. Savoury snacks

Previous Standard

No savoury snacks¹ shall be provided as part of the meal or snack

Revised Standard

All meals and snacks

Only the following savoury snacks can be provided:

- Plain oatcakes
- Plain savoury crackers
- Plain rice cakes
- Plain breadsticks

Plain means those without the addition of other ingredients, seasonings, coatings or flavours such as cheese or yoghurt. These should be limited to a maximum of once per day.

9. Bread and bread rolls - *New

Previous Standard

No standard

Revised Standard

All meals and snacks - Only bread and bread rolls which contain a minimum of 3g fibre per 100g can be provided.

10. Savoury pastry and pastry products - *NEW

Previous Standard

No standard

Revised Standard

Main meal and light meal - Savoury pastry and pastry products should be limited to a maximum of once per week.

Snack - These foods should not be provided at snack occasions.

¹ 'Savoury snacks' are defined as pre-packaged items which can be eaten without preparation. They typically consist of, or include as a basic ingredient, potatoes (crisps) or other root vegetables, maize, wheat or rice with added salt, sugar and fat.

11. Oils and spreads

Previous Standard

Oils that are high in polyunsaturated and/or monounsaturated fats shall be used. Spreadable fats (with a fat content of more than 70%) that are high in polyunsaturated and/or monounsaturated fats shall be used. Spreads with a fat content of less than 70% fat should not be used.

Revised Standard

All meals and snacks - Oils should contain a saturated fat content of no more than 16g per 100g. Fat spreads should contain a saturated fat content of no more than 20g per 100g.

12. Salt, other condiments and preserves

Previous Standard

No salt shall be added to food while cooking. No salt or condiments, for example soy sauce, shall be available to add to food after the cooking process is complete.

Revised Standard

Main meal and light meal

No salt should be used in cooking. No salt should be provided to add to food after the cooking process is complete. Other condiments, preserves, syrups and honey should only be provided infrequently and sparingly to add to the acceptability of a meal. When provided, these should be lower fat, salt, and sugar varieties where possible.

Snack - These foods should not be provided at snack occasions.

13. Confectionery

Previous Standard

No confectionery shall be provided as part of the meal or a snack.

Revised Standard

All meals and snacks - Confectionery should not be provided at any time.

14. Drinks

Previous Standard

The only drinks that can be provided as part of a young child's meals are:

- milk – whole milk for children aged 1–2 years. Semi-skimmed milk can be provided for children age 2–5, if eating well.
- plain water
- a combination of pure unsweetened fruit juice or plain water (50:50 dilution) and limited to mealtimes only. Children should be offered a choice of milk and plain water to drink during the day.

All meals and snacks

The only drinks that should be provided are:

- Still plain water, plain milk or unsweetened fortified non-dairy alternative

7. Rationale for revised food and drink standards

Fruit and vegetables

To emphasise the importance of increasing vegetable consumption, the standard was updated to provide a minimum of two servings of vegetables with every main meal. Fruit or vegetables now need to be provided as part of all snacks. Restrictions on dried fruit have been added so that they are only available at one meal occasion per day (main meal or light meal only) to reduce risk of developing dental caries. Guidance on suitable portion sizes has been strengthened to ensure children are provided with appropriate portions of both fruit, vegetables and dried fruit. In addition, fruit is now always available as an alternative to dessert (if on the menu).

Oily fish

The standard has been updated to provide additional flexibility of when oily fish can be provided across the day, and to ensure it's not only provided at lunchtime. In addition, the recommendation of a maximum frequency has been added to reflect the toxicological considerations as per the [SACN Advice on Fish consumption: Benefits and Risks \(2004\)](#) report.

Red and red processed meat - *New

This new standard aims to limit frequency of serving red and red processed meat, recognising the Scottish Dietary Goal of no more than 70g a day (for an adult). The goal is based on evidence showing an increased risk of developing colorectal cancer later in life with higher levels of consumption. The standard is based on frequency, due to a lack of evidence to base a suitable portion weight for this age group. In addition, weighing servings of red and red processed meat may be an impractical expectation of early year providers.

Sweetened and baked products, puddings and desserts (including dairy and non-dairy alternatives) - *New

This new standard aims to limit the provision of these products as they often contain a high free sugar and fat content. Limiting their provision will reduce the amount of free sugar provided by early learning settings. This will support achievement of the recommended 5% of energy from free sugars, which now applies from age 1, following the recommendation from the [SACN Feeding young children aged 1-5 \(2023\)](#) report. No longer permitting these foods at snack occasions will also support good oral health.

Breakfast cereals - *New

Some breakfast cereals are high in free sugars and salt and do not contain enough fibre. This standard has been developed to ensure that any breakfast cereals offered support the diet by providing an appropriate range of nutrients. The specification is based on breakfast cereals that are currently on the market and aligns with the [regulations for food provided in primary and secondary schools in Scotland](#).

Fried foods

The wording of the standard has been strengthened to ensure that fried foods are not served as part of snacks, and that if chips are served, they must be served as part of a meal.

Savoury snacks

In order to provide a choice of starchy carbohydrate foods, particularly those that can be served as part of a snack, plain oatcakes, savoury crackers, rice cakes and breadsticks can be provided. Providing only plain varieties will keep levels of salt and sugar to a minimum. This will contribute to ensuring children's energy requirements can be met.

Bread and bread rolls - *New

A new standard for bread and bread rolls has been introduced to support meeting the recommendation for fibre from the [SACN Carbohydrates and Health \(2015\)](#) report for children from age 2 years to consume 15g of fibre per day. This standard aligns with the regulations in primary and secondary schools.

Yoghurts and fromage frais (including non-dairy alternatives) - *New

The [SACN Feeding young children aged 1-5 \(2023\)](#) report recommended that dairy products such as yoghurts and fromage frais should be plain and unsweetened due to the high contribution they make to free sugar intakes in this age group. The new standard includes those sweetened with non-sugar sweeteners, which aims to reduce children's overall preference for sweet tasting foods. Providing only plain and unsweetened yoghurts and fromage frais will also allow it to be provided as a snack.

Savoury pastry and pastry products - *New

Most savoury pastry and pastry products have a high fat content and in particular saturated fat. A new standard has been introduced so that provision of these products is limited to no more than once per week and only provided a meal times. This will support a reduction in the contribution of fat and saturated fat from these foods, and to reduce the development of a taste preference for them.

Sweet pastries are included within the standard for "Sweetened and baked products, puddings and desserts (including dairy and non-dairy alternatives)".

Oils and spreads

The [SACN Feeding young children aged 1-5 \(2023\)](#) report recommended that current population dietary guidelines apply from around age 2 years. This standard has been updated to ensure that oils and spreads provided have a lower saturated fat content to support achievement of this recommendation. The standard also no longer has a minimum fat content to reflect the SACN recommendation of the Eatwell Guide recommendations applying from age 2 years.

Salt, other condiments and preserves

This standard has been amended to allow small portions of condiments to be served where it may help with the palatability of a meal e.g. a burger which would otherwise be quite dry. The wording emphasises the need to select varieties with lower salt and sugar to minimise the contribution of these nutrients.

The standard now also includes preserves. As preserves are high in sugar, the standard aims to minimize the provision of these, whilst still allowing some to be provided infrequently and in small amounts e.g. jam on toast with breakfast.

Confectionery

The wording of the standard has been strengthened to ensure that confectionery is not provided within early learning settings at all.

Drinks

The drinks standard has been amended to remove fruit juice or other sugar containing drinks in order to reduce free sugar intake and protect oral health. Non-sugar sweetened drinks are also not permitted to ensure that children do not develop a preference for sweet drinks. This reflects the recommendation from the [SACN Feeding young children aged 1-5 \(2023\)](#) report that milk or water, in addition to breast milk, should constitute the majority of drinks given to children of this age.

Whilst the type of milk provided is not specified in the wording of the standard, the guidance on what type of milk to provide which accompanies this reflects the updated recommendation from [SACN Feeding young children aged 1-5 \(2023\)](#) report. This is that whole or semi-skimmed milk can be provided from age 1.

8. Sample menus and analysis

In order to ensure that the revised nutrient and food and drinks standards could be achieved, a two week menu and a vegetarian menu was devised and nutritionally analysed. These menus have been adopted within the STT guidance as examples of best practice.

9. Recommendations from the Technical Working Group

The TWG recommend that the nutrient and food and drink standards are revised within 5 years, unless there is a significant change to the evidence base before then.

10. Annex: Nutrient standards split by meal occasion

Table 4- Nutrient standards by meal occasion

Nutrient	Max/Min	Full day (90%)	Main meal (30%)	Light meal (20%)	Snack (10%)
Energy (kcal/d)	N/A	1108	369	246	123
Total fat (g)	Max	43.1	14.4	9.6	4.8
Saturated fat (g)	Max	12.3	4.1	2.7	1.4
Carbohydrate (g)	Min	147.7	49.2	32.8	16.4
Free sugars (g)	Max	14.8	4.9	3.3	1.6
Protein (g)	Min	15.4	5.1	3.4	1.7
Fibre (AOAC) (g)	Min	13.5	4.5	3	1.5
Vitamin C (mg)	Min	27	9	6	3
Vitamin A (mcg)	Min	360	120	80	40
Iron (mg)	Min	6.2	2.1	1.4	0.7
Calcium (mg)	Min	360	120	80	40
Zinc (mg)	Min	5.2	1.7	1.2	0.6
Folate (mcg)	Min	76.5	25.5	17	8.5
Salt (g)	Max	2.25	0.75	0.50	0.25
Sodium (mg)	Max	900	300	200	100



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