

Guidance for Best Practices on School Meals

Aimed at Schools in the London Borough of
Lewisham

June 2026



**Good Food
Lewisham**

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Summary

As more schools are reviewing their school catering contracts, [Good Food Lewisham](#), Lewisham's food partnership, have put together a guidance to help schools consider the options around catering procurement, share useful resources and highlight best practice when it comes to school meals.

This guidance is heavily influenced by published legislation including School Food Standards updated 2025, Southwark Council – Framework for nursery, primary and secondary school food service (2025) and Eat Better, Start Better updated in 2017. The updated School Food Standards will become statutory for Primary Schools starting in 2027.

Top Recommendations for Schools

Every school meal should meet strict quality thresholds—whether a school cooks it themselves or uses an outsourcing company. The main take away is to use this guidance to ensure that school meals (whether in-house or outsourced with catering companies) are adhering to the School Food Standards.

Ideally good school meals should:

- Contribute to family food security
- Improve pupil's concentration and behaviour in class
- Increase the amount of fruit and vegetables, and reduce the amount of sugar and salt consumed by pupils at lunchtime
- Encourage children to try new foods

It can be daunting following all the legislation whilst keeping food tasty and meals enjoyable for children. Good Food Lewisham has compiled School Meal best practices based on case studies and positive outcomes and created a step-by-step guide for schools, moving from the easiest,

immediate actions at the bottom to the most complex structural changes at the top to help any school considering making changes to their school meals.

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO IMPROVING SCHOOL MEALS FROM EASIEST TO HARDEST TASKS



Resource 1: Step-by-step guide to improving school meals

Why Change is Needed

There are **118** Lewisham schools serving a young, highly diverse population (300,600 total residents; 25% are aged 0–17).

Childhood obesity is persistently high. 21.8% of Reception and 39% of Year 6 children are classified as having excess weight. Lewisham ranks 11th highest in London for childhood obesity. This is directly linked to rising CAMHS mental health referrals and long-term physical illnesses.

22.6% of children under 16 live in low-income families (highest in Evelyn and New Cross), making school lunch the only guaranteed meal of the day for many.

On average 11-18 year olds are only consuming 2.8 portions of fruit and veg. 96% of children are not meeting their fibre recommendations, 85% of children do not meet the recommendations for saturated fats and only 1 in

10 children meet the recommendations of no more than 5% of energy coming from free sugars.

Feedback from some of the local students (Prendergast Ladywell, Forest Hill, Sydenham School) report school food is "not tasty," leaving them "tired and hungry." Parents explicitly worry about the lack of healthy choices.

Local Strategic Frameworks influencing this Guidance

Food Justice Action Plan: A council initiative targeting systemic food poverty. Defines food justice as reliable and fair access to nutritious, sustainable, affordable and culturally appropriate food for everyone, including children.

Good Food Lewisham: A Sustainable Food Places Silver Award-winning network (2024) partnering with the council to pivot focus toward transforming school dinners.

Lewisham Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2025–2030): Focuses on improving residents' physical and mental health by prioritising early prevention and acting directly on the social determinants of health to reduce extreme local inequalities.

Public Health England's Whole Systems Approach to Obesity: A structural framework that moves away from individual blame, instead guiding local authorities to dismantle "obesogenic environments" through planned and collaborative community action.

Recommended Support Pathways for in-house and outsourced catering

Chefs in Schools (In-House Option): Helps schools transition away from mass contracts to independent, in-house catering. They place restaurant-trained chefs in schools, run an 8-week "School Chef Educator" training course, and focus on 100% scratch cooking. (Local success stories: John Ball and Rushey Green Primary).

Nourish / School Food Matters (Whole-School Support): A holistic programme that uses community feedback to build bespoke school food policies, audit dining spaces and run sensory food workshops.

ProVeg UK School Plates (Menu Optimisation): A non-profit providing free menu reviews, recipe development and plant-based workshops to reduce carbon footprints and cutting costs.

Olive Dining (Bespoke Outsourcing): A smaller, boutique commercial caterer holding a Food for Life Bronze award, focusing on fresh sourcing, on-trend menus and strict allergen control.

The Guidance

A checklist has been created for nurseries, primary and secondary schools following the Southwark Council – Framework for nursery, primary and secondary school food service.

This makes it easier for schools to make sure their school meals are inline with the School Food Standards whether the food is made by the school or outsourced.

These are shared below for ease:



Good Food Lewisham

School Dinners Guidance

Nursery Schools and Nursery School Classes

Breakfast

A healthy breakfast must include:

- ☐ One portion of starchy carbohydrate e.g. porridge, fortified breakfast cereals or bread (a 50:50 mix of white and wholegrain bread or wholegrain bread must be offered)
- ☐ A portion of fruit or vegetables
- ☐ A portion of dairy or fortified dairy alternative e.g. milk with cereal or a low sugar yogurt
- ☐ No sugar-coated and chocolate-flavoured cereals permitted
- ☐ Must be less than 5% sugar (5g per 100g dry weight) cereals
- ☐ No juice to be served, water and milk only
- ☐ Must not contain high fat, high salt, high sugar foods or processed meat, e.g. pastries, sausage rolls

Mid-morning break

- ☐ Alongside milk and fruit, serve raw vegetables several times a week, provide a starchy food as part of at least one snack each day
- ☐ To make fruit and vegetable snacks appealing and easy to eat, cut them up and present in a way to help children make positive choices
- ☐ More substantial snack-meals (>100kcal) are only to be served to those children who do not stay for lunch
- ☐ Substantial snack-meals must not contain high fat, high salt, high sugar foods or processed meat, e.g. pastries, sausage rolls, biscuits, cake or processed fruits

Lunch

The school lunchtime meal must be at least two courses, a hot main meal and a healthy dessert or a starter and a hot main meal. If a starter is served, fruit to be available as an alternative. Milk must be available for all pupils who would like it.

Over a weeks menu there must be:

- ☐ Three different starchy foods, provide wholegrain starchy foods for at least one breakfast, lunch and tea each week
 - ☐ At least one portion of fruit or vegetables with every meal, with a variety across the week
 - ☐ A portion of protein each day. This could be beans, pulses, fish, eggs or meat (red meat or poultry) to provide a variety across the week
 - ☐ A meat and fish free day once a week, using alternatives such as pulses or beans
 - ☐ One portion of sustainable oily fish (salmon, sardines, pilchards) at least once every 3 weeks
 - ☐ Limit fried starchy foods to a maximum of once a week. Limit meat processed products to no more than once a week
 - ☐ Ketchup, similar sauces and mayonnaise must not be served as an accompaniment to the meal
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Afternoon break & After school club

- ☐ Alongside milk and fruit, serve raw vegetables several times a week, provide a starchy food as part of at least one snack each day
- ☐ To make fruit and vegetable snacks appealing and easy to eat, cut them up and present in a way to help children make positive choices



Good Food Lewisham

School Dinners Guidance

Primary Schools (Reception – Year 6)

Breakfast

A healthy breakfast must include:

- ☐ One portion of starchy carbohydrate e.g. porridge, fortified breakfast cereals or bread (a 50:50 mix of white and wholegrain bread or wholegrain bread must be offered)
 - ☐ A portion of fruit or vegetables
 - ☐ A portion of dairy or dairy alternative e.g. milk with cereal or a low sugar yogurt
 - ☐ No sugar-coated and chocolate-flavoured cereals permitted
 - ☐ Must be less than 5% sugar (5g per 100g dry weight) cereals
 - ☐ No juice will be served, water and milk only
 - ☐ Must not contain high fat, high salt, high sugar foods or processed meat, e.g. waffles, hash browns, sausages, sausage rolls, pastries, croissants, cereal bars and breakfast biscuits etc
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Mid-morning break

- ☐ Fresh fruit, whole or sliced only
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Lunch

- ☐ The lunchtime meal must be at least two courses, a hot main meal and a healthy dessert or a starter and a hot main meal. If a starter is served, fruit must be available as an alternative
- ☐ Milk must be available for all pupils who would like it
- ☐ There must be two meat and fish free days per week , which may not always be on the same day of the week. These days will be marketed as a 'planet friendly' day
- ☐ There must be a meat and a vegetarian/vegan main course served every day, except for on meat and fish free days where two non-meat main courses must be served
- ☐ Textured Vegetable Protein (Quorn or equivalent) must only be served a maximum of twice per week to vegetarians and vegans
- ☐ A 'Schools choice' option must be offered up to three times a week. This is a third-choice option consisting of a jacket potato with various fillings or pasta with a tomato or vegetable-based sauce. This helps to ensure enjoyable options are available for pupils whose tastes are more limited, whilst encouraging pupils to try other main choices
- ☐ Two choices of vegetable must be available and offered to pupils every day and hot fresh vegetables must be offered three times per week
- ☐ Four choices of salad must be available and offered to pupils every day, including plain options and mixed salads
- ☐ Low sugar and lower salt ketchup or similar must be used when served as an accompaniment, a maximum of once per week

After school club

- ☐ Meets standards for school food across the whole school day



Good Food Lewisham School Dinners Guidance

Secondary Schools (Year 7 – Year 13)

Breakfast

The service will comprise of porridge and cereals, fruit, low sugar yoghurt, breadbasket items and hot breakfast items (must be compliant with the school food standards across the whole day), tea, coffee and milk-based (or milk alternative) hot drinks and pure fruit juice.

- ☐ No sugar-coated and chocolate-flavoured cereals permitted. Must be less than 5% sugar (5g per 100g dry weight) cereals
- ☐ Milk and milk-alternatives must be provided
- ☐ Provide 400 kcal per meal (a chef guide nutritional analysis is not required)

Mid-morning break

The morning service offer must comprise of a hot and cold choice of snacks and beverages, including a selection of: hot snacks (must be compliant with the school food standards across the whole day), fruit, bread-basket items, low sugar yoghurt, 50% fruit-based bakes, tea, coffee and milk-based (or milk alternative) hot drinks and pure fruit juice.

Additionally, mid-morning break must aim to facilitate a lunch style service if served from 11am onwards, enabling pupils to purchase lunch items during a morning break period. The menu must include a two course 'main meal deal' for both a hot meal and a cold meal (if required), excluding drinks.

Must be offered as a 'Healthy Meal Bundle', which requires:

- ☐ At least two portions of fruit, vegetables or salad every day
- ☐ At least three portions of lean protein per week, including pulses, eggs, meat and beans
- ☐ No more than two fried portions of food per week
- ☐ No more than two portions of pastry per week
- ☐ No more than two portions of processed meat or meat substitute per week (as applies across the whole school day)
- ☐ Provide 500–700 kcal per meal (a chef guide nutritional analysis is not required)

Lunch

Must be sold as a 'Healthy Meal Bundle', which requires:

- ☐ At least two portions of fruit, vegetables or salad every day
 - ☐ At least three portions of lean protein per week, including pulses, eggs, meat and beans
 - ☐ No more than two fried portions of food per week
 - ☐ No more than two portions of pastry per week
 - ☐ No more than two portions of processed meat or meat substitute per week (as applies across the whole school day)
 - ☐ Provide 500-700 kcal per meal (a chef guide nutritional analysis is not required)
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General information

- ☐ Ideally, 2 meat and fish free days will be provided each week (the minimum is 1 – see the school specific requirements section for confirmation). This must be across all food services on the applicable days
- ☐ Pizza must only be served a maximum of twice per week across the whole school day
- ☐ The Supplier is not required to supply pre-packaged snacks (e.g. individually wrapped sweet biscuits, cakes, cereal bars, waffles, muffins, crisps etc.)
- ☐ The Supplier must not offer cookies or waffles, any replacement items must emphasise enhanced nutritional content e.g. lower sugar fruit flapjack or 50% fruit-based bakes meeting the school food standards
- ☐ Any snack provided must comply with the School Food Standards across the whole school day.
- ☐ Only provide either still water, 100% fruit juice (max 150ml), fruit or vegetable juice with still water, or combinations of fruit juice and lower fat milk or plain yoghurt, plain soya, rice or oat drinks enriched with calcium; cocoa and lower fat milk; flavoured lower fat milk, all with less than 5% added sugars or honey.
- ☐ Drinking water must be freely available.
- ☐ There must be one portion of starchy carbohydrate e.g. wholemeal pasta, potatoes or rice served with each healthy meal bundle, pizza and burger buns must be served with an additional non-bread carbohydrate.
- ☐ Two choices of vegetable must be available and offered to pupils every day and hot fresh vegetables must be offered three times per week
- ☐ Four choices of salad must be available and offered to pupils every day as part of a 'meal deal', including plain options and mixed salads

Information from: Southwark Council – Framework for nursery, primary and secondary school food service Southwark Council (January 2025)

Meeting the standards across the whole school day

The School Food Standards apply to all food service periods (breakfast clubs, break times, lunch, and after-school clubs). In practice this means that weekly frequency limits on items like pastry, fried foods, and processed meats (all limited to twice a week) are cumulative. A portion of chips or a sausage roll served during morning break or after school club, counts toward the school's maximum weekly allowance. This prevents fried food or processed meat items from being served more than once more *at any time* that week.

Full Guidance

Introduction

Lewisham is a thriving and diverse London Borough home to 300,600¹ people. It houses a wide variety of cultures, with 61,000² residents having only a non-UK identity. Its population is also quite young with 25% of the population aged between 0 and 17³. Institutions have opportunities to flourish in Lewisham with 118⁴ schools around the borough (including nurseries, college sixth forms, secondary and primary schools), who can help children learn to eat well and teach them to grow and cook food.

Why a change is needed

Eating a healthy balanced meal is important for all ages, but it is more so for the children of Lewisham, childhood obesity in Lewisham remains persistently high since 2014/2015 and even higher than adult obesity, with 21.8% of reception children (aged 4-5) and 39% of Year 6 children⁵ classified

¹ Office for National Statistics, 2023

² Lewisham Observatory, 2025

³ Lewisham Observatory, 2025

⁴ Department for Education, 2026

⁵ Lewisham Council, 2025c

as carrying excess weight. This ranks Lewisham as the 11th highest borough with childhood obesity. The proportion of children living with excess weight nearly doubles between entering reception and leaving Year 6. This highlights that environmental factors during primary school years heavily impact weight gain.

Obesity is linked with other health issues such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease. There is also a strong correlation between obesity and a higher prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. In 2024, 21% of children aged 8 to 10 reported having a longstanding illness (this was defined as any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last over 12 months)⁶. As a result, the number of children requiring access to mental health and emotional wellbeing services in Lewisham increased, since 2022-23, there has been a 5% increase in referrals to Lewisham's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)⁷.

It is important to provide nutritious school meals as for many children it is the only meal they may eat that day. 22.6% of children under 16 in Lewisham live in low-income families, this is higher compared to the whole of London (18.8%)⁸. The most deprived areas are the north of Lewisham with Evelyn and New cross being the 1st and 3rd most deprived parts of the borough⁹.

Not only are childhood obesity levels high, but children are failing to meet their required nutritional intake.

On average, children aged 11 to 18 years eat 2.8 portions of fruit and vegetables a day, with 96% of them not meeting their fibre recommendations, 85% of children do not meet the recommendations for

⁶ NHS digital, 2025

⁷ Lewisham Council, 2025a

⁸ Lewisham Council, 2025b

⁹ Lewisham Observatory, 2025

saturated fats and only 1 in 10 children meet the recommendations of no more than 5% of energy coming from free sugars¹⁰.

A change to school meals is required. When interviewed, a student from Prendergast Ladywell School described the food as “not tasty” and felt “tired and hungry” when getting home from school, this was a shared sentiment with students from Forest Hill Boys and Sydenham School. Parents of students from Schools in the Lewisham Borough express their concern of the limited healthy choices that their children have during school meals.

Lewisham’s Food Justice Action Plan

The Food Justice Action Plan was developed by Lewisham Council’s Public Health team and its partners because ‘food injustice is one of the biggest problems facing Lewisham’. Food justice can be defined as reliable and fair access to nutritious, sustainable, affordable and culturally appropriate food for everyone, including children.

The cost-of-living crisis, deprivation and inequality in access to services has led to an increased use of emergency provisions like food banks. The issues contributing to, and exacerbating, food injustice are examined in the plan¹¹. Marginalised groups and households with children are more likely to be experiencing food injustice.

¹⁰ Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2025

¹¹ Lewisham Council 2023

Good Food Lewisham¹²

Good Food Lewisham, founded in 2016 by Lewisham Council and GCDA, and currently hosted by Lewisham Local, is a network of passionate people working together to change the world of food in the borough of Lewisham. It aims to connect the diverse and lively community to healthy, sustainable and affordable food that is grown, produced and prepared locally which will promote the vibrant food culture and help prospering local businesses. It is also a hub for any individual, business, school organisation or community group to access information surrounding food and support to improve their local food systems.

In 2024 Good Food Lewisham led on the application for a Silver Award from Sustainable Food Places for Lewisham, awarded in July 2024. The award is for all the fantastic work that has been accomplished in the borough of Lewisham. Good food Lewisham have focused on promoting the NHS Healthy Start Scheme, Lewisham Refill with the aim to make business around Lewisham free water-refill stations, developed a Good Food Lewisham Business Charter and they have also been involved in creating a directory of community gardens and foodbanks available in the borough. Now they want to tackle school dinners as this was a key priority in their [three year action plan](#).

About the Guidance

The guidance was developed by a MSc student working with Good Food Lewisham. Surveys were created for parents, teachers and children of schools in the Lewisham Borough. This helped to discover any improvements required for school meals. The surveys were kept anonymous however they were asked to declare their school. All questions were optional and kept

¹² Lewisham Local, 2026

standardised. The surveys were sent out to parent group chats and carried out with children in youth clubs.

The guidance was heavily influenced by published legislation including Southwark Council – Framework for nursery, primary and secondary school food service (2025), School Food Standards¹³ updated 2025 and Eat Better, Start Better updated in 2017. These updated School Food Standards will become statutory for Primary Schools starting in 2027.

Following Strategic Frameworks

Lewisham Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2025–2030)

The main goal of the Lewisham Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2025–2030) is to improve the mental and physical health of all residents while reducing health inequalities. Crucially, the strategy shifts the borough's focus away from reactive healthcare and focuses heavily on prioritising prevention and acting directly on the social determinants of health (the everyday environments where people live, learn and work).

The strategy has four core pillars that it targets its action across the borough:

- **Poverty:** Tackling structural deprivation and its direct impacts on poor health outcomes.
- **Housing:** Securing safe, high-quality and health-supporting living environments.
- **Education:** Using local educational institutions as foundational drivers for health literacy and early intervention.

¹³ Department for Education, 2025

- Prevention: Shifting resources toward proactive measures that prevent chronic physical and mental illness before they take hold.

The Whole Systems Approach to Obesity (2019)

This Public Health England framework outlines a structural methodology designed to help local authorities move away from isolated, individual-focused health campaigns. Instead, it addresses the complex, interconnected societal, environmental and commercial drivers of excess weight. The framework operates on the understanding that obesity is a systemic issue embedded in the environments where people live, learn and work. The key aims of the framework include:

- Shifting from Individual Blame to Environmental Intervention: Recognising that simply telling people to eat better is inadequate; local authorities must actively reshape "obesogenic environments".
- Implementing a "Health in All Policies" Model: Engaging stakeholders outside traditional public health roles, such as local businesses, schools and the voluntary sector, to create a unified network of collective action.
- Targeting Root Social Determinants and Deprivation: Directly addressing health inequalities by focusing place-based resources on the most economically disadvantaged communities.
- Maximising Local Community Assets: Using a flexible, 6-phase process to map, connect and strengthen existing local networks to create sustainable, long-term healthy habits.

This Guidance follows the aforementioned strategic frameworks. Rather than treating nutrition as an individual responsibility, both frameworks argue that public health must be improved by transforming "obesogenic environments", the everyday spaces where people live, play and learn. By

introducing rigorous, standardised checklists based on the School Food Standards, this guidance systematically alters the daily environment of Lewisham's children. It aims to shift school food operations away from highly processed, commercial foods and replaces them with fresh and nutrient-dense alternatives. This directly targets the social determinants of health and local inequalities, providing suitable food for vulnerable families in the borough's most socioeconomically deprived wards, such as Evelyn and New Cross.

Furthermore, the guidance actively promotes collective and systemic action by targeting all schools in the Borough, this achieves a far greater impact than isolated campaigns. By using trusted community organisations like Good Food Lewisham and Chefs in Schools, the guidance helps to turn the school canteen into an active environment for early preventative health. Restructuring menus helps curb the high intake of free sugars, salt and saturated fats, helping reduce childhood obesity and prevent chronic illnesses like type 2 diabetes. By providing reliable access to high-quality nutritious food, this guidance contributes towards improving the health of young people. This includes mental health, emotional resilience and overall developmental wellbeing.

The Guidance

Whether you go it alone with in-house catering, have support or decide to go for a catering contract school dinners are the perfect opportunity to get kids to learn how to eat healthily, try new foods and even learn to cook.

Ideally good school meals should:

- Contribute to family food security
- Improve a pupil's concentration and behaviour in class

- Increase the amount of fruit and vegetables, and reduce the amount of saturated fat, sugar and salt consumed by pupils at lunchtime
- Encourage children to try new foods

Following the Southwark Council – Framework for nursery, primary and secondary school food service Southwark Council (2025). 3 checklists have been completed as a guide to ensure that a school is following advice from the Eat Better, Start Better Guidance¹⁴. You can find these on the Good Food Lewisham website.

Good Food Lewisham has also compiled School Meal best practices based on case studies and positive outcomes and created a step-by-step guide for schools, moving from the easiest, immediate actions at the bottom to the most complex structural changes at the top to help any school considering making changes to their school meals:

1. Use checklists to track compliance

Governors and leadership teams can use open-source toolkits and independent awards (like Food for Life or ProVeg UK) to audit their menus. Consistently using standard checklists guarantees that the kitchen is actually following the School Food Standards long-term.

2. Build a food policy with parents and kids

Gather feedback from parents, teachers and students to create a bespoke school food policy and menu. Working with programmes like Nourish helps schools engage the wider community and directly answers parents' concerns about the lack of healthy options.

3. Make the dining hall a classroom

Train kitchen staff to act as food educators by running mini menu-tasting sessions in the canteen and introducing diverse and culturally appropriate

¹⁴ Action for Children, 2017

flavours. Making healthy food familiar and exciting reduces the risk of kids rejecting it. Garden spaces can also be used to teach children about where their food comes from.

4. Using more fresh and local produce

Consider using more fresh and local ingredients instead of frozen, pre-packaged convenience foods. Even if it's just for snacks, the ingredients could be as local as using produce from your school's garden. Partnering with organisations like Chefs in Schools can help retrain kitchen staff in advanced culinary skills and menu balance to easily cut down on sugar, salt and fat and tackle future menu revisions.

5. Consider using more in-house practices

Move away from massive, highly processed commercial foods offered and switch to self-managed, independent school kitchens where possible. This gives schools total control over their budgets and menus. If going fully in-house is not within budget or seems daunting, consider starting with in-house breakfast clubs. Organisations such as School Food Matters have resources to support the development of Breakfast Clubs, and Chefs in Schools can offer help and guidance on how to bring your catering in-house; help with recruiting and training kitchen staff; and operational templates. They can support schools with the planning and transition to in-house catering and provide a network for chefs (see section “Recommended Organisations” for more information about Chefs In Schools).

The benefits of in-house catering practices, as described on www.gov.uk/guidance/buying-for-schools-things-to-consider-before-you-start/catering-services, which include:

- An increased uptake of school meals
- Opportunity to negotiate better prices from suppliers
- An increased food quality
- Responding quicker if your equipment is broken or faulty
- Developing staff skills through bespoke training
- Generating income by offering your catering services to other schools or nurseries
- Being in control of your expenditure

However, it is important to note that there are costs, staff training and demand for food to consider.

So, the main take away is to use this guidance to ensure that school meals (whether in-house or outsourced with catering companies) are adhering to the School Food Standards.

Using Southwark as a Case Study

Southwark Council pledged to develop a new framework, [*Framework for nursery, primary and secondary school food service*](#), which was published in 2025 and aimed at transforming how schools can source and pay for food services. This along with other School Meal initiatives in the borough saw a decrease of obesity by 9.3% among Reception children and by 5.6% among Year 6 children, 34% of parents reported a noticeable improvement in their child's ability to concentrate during lessons and the nutritional quality at lunchtime saw a steep rise, significantly increasing the daily intake of fruits and vegetables while slashing the consumption of processed sugars and sodium¹⁵.

Recommended Organisations

With many schools currently being given the option to do in house catering, there are organisations which can help schools set up for the first time or even perfect their practice if they have been doing in house catering themselves for any length of time.

One of these organisations that are already helping schools in the borough are Chefs in Schools¹⁶. John Ball Primary School and Rushey Green Primary School have already seen positive outcomes from working with Chefs in Schools.

Chefs in Schools acts as a practical, hands-on partner that helps schools move away from heavily processed commercial catering contracts and

¹⁵ Local Government Association, 2023

¹⁶ Chefs in Schools, 2026

transition toward freshly made from scratch meals. Rather than just hitting the legal bare minimum of the UK School Food Standards, the charity actively embeds professional culinary standards into the school day. They specialise in helping schools bring their catering operations in-house, recruiting restaurant-trained chefs directly into school kitchens to establish a vibrant, health-focused food culture from the ground up.

To ensure menus directly align with nutrition guidelines, the charity focuses heavily on retraining existing kitchen staff through their structured "School Chef Educator" training programme. Led by award-winning chefs and qualified nutritionists, this course teaches teams how to swap out frozen, pre-packaged items for fresh, locally sourced ingredients. Staff are trained in advanced culinary skills, menu creation and methods for reducing food waste while incorporating more fibre-rich ingredients, such as pulses and whole grains. This directly helps schools meet strict statutory limits on sugars, salts and fried foods.

Crucially, the organisation works with children to reduce the risk of them rejecting healthier menu options by turning the dining hall into an extension of the classroom. Kitchen teams are trained to act as educators, running mini food-tasting sessions, introducing diverse flavours and talking to pupils about how food is grown and prepared. By making nutritious food exciting and familiar, they successfully increase the consumption of fruit and vegetables among pupils who might otherwise be hesitant to try them.

For school leadership teams and governors, the charity provides open-source toolkits, checklist guides and procurement advice to ensure long-term compliance and financial sustainability. These resources guide schools on how to select quality food wholesale suppliers and monitor compliance with national food standards independently.

Other options to consider include: Nourish Catering¹⁷ (by the charity *School Food Matters*), who won a Bronze Food for Life Schools Award, are a holistic, whole-school food improvement programme. They support schools by gathering community feedback (from parents, pupils, and staff) to build a bespoke school food policy. They provide sensory food workshops for children, parent engagement sessions, and audit the dining environment to make healthy eating a positive, seamless part of the entire school day.

ProVeg UK (School Plates Programme)¹⁸ is a targeted, non-profit initiative focused strictly on increasing the quality and uptake of plant-based meals in schools. They offer free menu reviews, recipe development and chef workshops to help schools significantly reduce their carbon footprint and save money. They also run a tiered "School Plates Awards" system (Bronze, Silver, Gold) to celebrate schools achieving these healthy, sustainable targets.

Olive Dining¹⁹ is a commercial contract caterer with an active Bronze Food for Life Schools award. They are a slightly smaller, more bespoke corporate contract caterer specializing in education. They position themselves as an alternative to the "giant" catering corporations, focusing heavily on modern, on-trend menus, fresh ingredient sourcing and managing strict allergen-controlled environments.

Legislation

Other legislation to be aware of:

- Food Safety Act 1990
- The Food Hygiene (England) Regulations 2006

¹⁷ School Food Matters, 2026

¹⁸ ProVeg UK, 2026

¹⁹ Olive Dining, 2026

- Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974
- The Food Information (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2019 and associated advice in Allergen guidance for food businesses | Food Standards Agency and Allergy guidance for schools
- Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 on the Provision of Food Information to Consumers
- The Separation of Waste (England) Regulations 2024
- Food Standards Agency
- School Food Standards including those which apply across the whole school day
- Eat Better, Start Better

About the authors

This guidance has been written by Jennifer Rodrigues dos Santos, a MSc student in Dietetics and Nutrition at the London Metropolitan University during a 3-week placement supporting Good Food Lewisham at Lewisham Local, a charity working to build happier, healthier, happier more resilient communities.

The guidance was reviewed by Jo Travers BSc RD MBDA from The London Nutritionist, a member of Good Food Lewisham's Steering Group.

References and Resources used throughout this Guidance:

Action for Children (2017) *Eat better, start better: voluntary food and drink guidelines for early years settings in England*. Available at:

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