



An Comhchoiste um Oideachas agus Óige

Tuarascáil maidir le Tionchair Chlár na mBéilí Scoile a
Mheasúnú

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Joint Committee on Education and Youth

Report on Evaluating the Impacts of the School Meals
Programme

March 2026

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RELATED INFORMATION

Publications

All publications for this committee are available on the [Oireachtas website](#).

Committee videos

Footage of Committee proceedings can be found on the [Committee videos page](#).

Committee debates

Transcripts of Committee debates can be found on the [Committee debates page](#).

Contact details

The contact details for the Committee can be found on the [Committee page](#).

Orders of reference

Read the [Orders of reference](#) for the Committee.

COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Cathaoirleach

[Cathal Crowe TD](#), Fianna Fáil

Leas-Cathaoirleach

[Senator Gareth Scahill](#), Fine Gael

Members

[Ruth Coppinger TD](#), People Before Profit-Solidarity

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[Ryan O'Meara TD](#), Fianna Fáil

[Darren O'Rourke TD](#), Sinn Féin

[Peter Roche TD](#), Fine Gael

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[Senator Linda Nelson Murray](#), Fine Gael

[Senator Pauline Tully](#), Sinn Féin

CATHAOIRLEACH'S FOREWORD

The Joint Committee on Education and Youth (the “Committee”) identified the School Meals Programme as a key policy issue and agreed to undertake an evaluation of the Programme to date and the impact it has had in participating Primary Schools.

The Committee agreed to produce a report having identified the following key Modules:

- Resources and Delivery,
- Nutrition and Wellbeing,
- Access and Inclusion,
- Sustainability,
- Governance and Coordination, and
- International Evidence and Best Practice.

The Committee sought and received written submissions from a wide range of stakeholders. The quality of the submissions, which included valuable research findings, practical experience and policy insights, was of tremendous assistance in informing the Committee’s work. These submissions are included in [Appendix 1](#) and provide important reference material.

The Committee also met with a wide range of stakeholders during a series of public hearings. These included school management bodies, school leaders, teacher representative organisations, the National Parents Council, civil

society organisations, an expert academic in nutrition policy and, most importantly, the testimony and research findings of Ms Áine O’Leary, Junior Cycle student, St. Mary’s Secondary School, Macroom, County Cork. The perspectives and experiences shared by witnesses were extremely valuable in helping the Committee to understand both the benefits of the Programme so far and the challenges associated with its delivery.

Senior Officials from the Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme also appeared before the Committee to brief it on the roll out of the Programme to date and expansion plans.

Arising from the evidence received through the written submissions and public hearings, the Committee examined the issues raised and prepared this report containing concrete and feasible recommendations. The Committee believes these will provide a clear pathway for the Programme to be rolled out to all Primary and Post Primary Schools.

As the Programme continues to expand, it is important that its delivery arrangements keep pace with its scale and ambition. Issues relating to procurement, school infrastructure, nutritional standards and programme governance must therefore be addressed in a structured and future proofed way.

Throughout its work, the Committee was mindful that the Programme ultimately exists to support the wellbeing and development of children and young people. Ensuring that all students have access to nutritious meals

during the school day can make a meaningful difference to their mental and physical health, learning and overall educational experience.

Is é bia an Saol agus is iad na daoine óga ár dtodhchaí. This is a seminal initiative that has the potential to transform the lives of generations of young people.

On 25 March 2026, the report was agreed to be published by the Committee.

The Committee also requests that the issues raised in the report be the subject of a debate in both Houses of the Oireachtas.



Cathal Crowe TD

Cathaoirleach to the Committee

March 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Full responsibility for the School Meals Programme should be moved to the Department of Education and Youth with the commensurate budget and resources.

The Department of Education and Youth should circulate a list of pre-approved suppliers for the School Meals Programme on a county basis to reduce the burden on School Principals.

A Kitchen and Dining/Canteen Area should be mandatory in all New School Building Specifications.

A Policy Paper on the Content of School Meals should be published that includes specifications around key areas such as portion size; nutritional specifications; eliminating highly processed foods; use of local ingredients and menu requirements.

Food Education and a Whole School Food Culture should be the cornerstone of the Programme, with all schools having a Food Education Policy which is subject to school inspections.

The School Meals Programme should be rolled out to all Post Primary Schools as an urgent national priority.

Universal Access must be enshrined in the School Meals Programme and small rural schools must be supported where necessary.

A Value for Money (VFM) National Audit on the Programme should be published.

In tandem, an independent research study should be commissioned to examine Nutrition; Mode of Delivery (Onsite versus Procurement), and

Qualitative Research (Social and Wider aspects with specific reference to School Attendance).

Onsite provision of School Meals, prepared from scratch and eaten in a communal setting, should be the preferred option as the Programme expands. Local staff could be employed directly to cook and serve the meals with student participation, where appropriate, in terms of learning life skills.

Other recommendations include:

- Striking off unpaid water charges in individual schools and abolishing water charges for schools into the future .
- Establishing an Executive Student Support Officer Role and Posts of Responsibility for Teachers.
- Reviewing the cost of providing high quality, nutritious meals.
- Adapting the curriculum to support a Good Food Culture.
- Legislating for Student Food Councils and elected Food Ambassadors.
- Examining the Future Viability of Community Hubs.
- Making reusable plates and cutlery mandatory.
- Self service catering to enhance student independence and personal responsibility.

TEN KEY REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are the Ten Key Report Recommendations, listed by the order in which they appear in the main body of the Report.

1. Full responsibility for the School Meals Programme should be moved to the Department of Education and Youth as an urgent national priority with the commensurate budget and an expanded unit. The unit must be properly resourced and include dedicated professional staff, i.e. Procurement Specialists, Dieticians/Nutrition experts, *et al*, who are directly employed by the Department.
2. The Department of Education and Youth should circulate a Pre-Approved List of Suppliers by County to all School Principals by Q3 2026. In advance, specific criteria for approval should be published and an invitation to Suppliers for inclusion on the list should be published on the Department's website.
3. A Kitchen and Dining/Canteen Area should be mandatory in all New School Building Specifications. It should be wholly separate from Multi-Purpose Rooms contained in the Specifications.
4. The Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme should publish a policy paper on the content of School Meals, to include specifications such as:
 - Age appropriate portion size,
 - Nutritional specifications of food, and possible inclusion of drinks,
 - Elimination of highly processed foods,

- Maximum use of local ingredients,
- Culturally inclusive menus, and
- Menus for students with additional educational needs and/or dietary requirements.

This policy paper should be subject to a public consultation process, including dedicated sessions with students, parents, and small/community food producers, and must be approved by the Minister for Education and Youth. The specifications will become mandatory for all schools and suppliers participating in the Programme within 12 months of publication.

The specifications in this document should be incorporated into the procurement process, as a key measure to ensure all students receive nutritional meals appropriate to their needs.

5. Food Education and a Whole School Food Culture that respects and understands that food is fundamentally important must be integral to the School Meals Programme. To this end, all Primary Schools should have a Food Education Policy and Food Education should be part of all Whole School Evaluations.
6. The School Meals Programme should be rolled out to all Post Primary Schools.
7. Universal Access must be enshrined in the School Meals Programme expansion to reduce any stigma. In addition, small rural schools must be

supported to ensure that the School Meals Programme is fully operational in those schools.

8. The Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme should conduct a Value for Money (VFM) National Audit on the School Meals Programme as an urgent priority for publication by the end of Q3 2026. The National Audit should include, *inter alia*: nutritional standards; food provenance; method of delivery; and parent, teacher and student feedback.
9. The Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme should commission an independent research study covering three areas:
 - Nutrition,
 - Mode of Delivery (Onsite versus Procurement), and
 - Qualitative Research (Social and Wider aspects with specific reference to School Attendance).

This research study should be completed by the end of Q1 2027. Its findings should be integral to the roll out of the Programme in Post Primary Schools.

10. Onsite provision of School Meals, prepared from scratch and eaten in a communal setting, should be the preferred option as the Programme expands. Advice should be sought from the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment regarding local employment arrangements, in

terms of employing catering staff directly to cook and serve the meals with student support, as appropriate.

CHAPTER 1: RESOURCES AND DELIVERY

RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE DELIVERY OF THE SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAMME

The Committee heard evidence regarding the roles of multiple departments and agencies involved in the delivery of the School Meals Programme.

The Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme (the “IWGSMP”) informed the Committee that, at its first meeting, it agreed its terms of reference, which includes the following priorities:

- *Procurement - Ensure that schools have the support and advice they require to manage the procurement process.*
- *...Inspections/Controls/Guidelines/Procedures - Ensure the existing audit process needs are fit for purpose with a view to implementing a separate inspection of food quality and nutritional standards separate to assessment of procurement, financial and governance procedures.*
- *Food Safety and Independent Nutritional Inspection/Evaluation - Work with key stakeholders to develop a process to ensure the food delivered to schools meets the nutritional standards.*
- *Impact of the School Meals Programme - engage with stakeholders to gather any feedback and information relevant to the programme.*
- *Health & Safety relating to School Meals Programme within school buildings.*
- *Develop a set of contracting options for schools to simplify the process for schools.¹*

¹ The Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme, [Opening Statement](#), 20 November 2025, pp. 1-2.

Evidence also demonstrated the extent to which the Programme now interacts directly with the education system and the day-to-day operation of schools.

For example, during the Committee’s hearing of 28 January 2026, Mr. Eoghan O’Byrne, Principal of St. Mary’s National School, Limerick, described the range of responsibilities now associated with the Programme at school level, stating: “...we are expected to look at food safety management, HACCP, the financial ability of the companies, environmental considerations and nutritional quality. As educators, we do not have the necessary expertise... Our expertise is in the education field.”²

Evidence from school management organisations also highlighted the administrative and operational responsibilities placed on schools under the current governance model. On 14 January 2026, the Joint Managerial Body (the “JMB”) noted that administration of the Programme, including procurement, coordination, record-keeping and day-to-day management, rests with schools and must be absorbed within existing resources.³

Education and Training Boards Ireland (“ETBI”) noted that while schools implement the Programme, no dedicated administrative resources are provided to support its operation. ETBI stated:

...this scheme does not provide the school with any administrative resources. Schools have to implement the scheme from within their already over-stretched personnel. In contrast, when the Department

² Mr. Eoghan O’Byrne, Principal, St. Mary’ National School, Limerick, Joint Committee on Education and Youth - [Debate](#): 28 January 2026.

³ The Joint Managerial Body, Joint Committee on Education and Youth – [Debate](#): 14 January 2026.

*of Education and Youth implemented the schoolbooks scheme, dedicated funding was provided to administer the scheme.*⁴

PROCUREMENT FRAMEWORK

The Committee recognises the scale and complexity of delivering daily meals to more than half a million pupils and acknowledges the significant administrative work undertaken to strengthen procurement documentation and oversight, including the publication of revised national procurement templates (see [Appendix 3](#)).

Under the existing model, schools are responsible for administering the School Meals Programme locally, including conducting procurement processes in line with public procurement rules. The IWGSMP noted that, *“it is the responsibility of each school to administer the Programme in their school including handling the procurement process in accordance with the rules and guidelines set out by the Schools Procurement Unit of the Department of Education and Youth.”*⁵

The Committee heard consistent evidence that, while the expansion of the School Meals Programme is widely supported, the current procurement model places a significant administrative and compliance burden on individual schools, and specifically on Principals.

Witnesses from School Management Bodies and Representative Organisations described this as a substantial and ongoing operational burden.

Mr. Seamus Mulconry, General Secretary of the Catholic Primary School Management Association (the “CPSMA”) opined stated that the *“programme*

⁴ Education and Training Boards Ireland, [Opening Statement](#), 14 January 2026, pp. 1-2.

⁵ The Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme, [Opening Statement](#), 20 November 2025, p. 2.

is very welcome, but the level of administration for primary schools, and particularly for principals, is unacceptable.”⁶

Similarly, Educate Together (“ET”) indicated that in a significant proportion of its schools, principals are directly managing procurement and compliance processes. Dr. Emer Nowlan, CEO, ET stated:

The most serious challenge is the administrative and procurement burden placed on schools. In nearly three-quarters of our schools, principals themselves are managing procurement. This typically takes several days over a number of weeks, followed by an ongoing weekly administrative workload of around five hours – or more. This is happening in a system already experiencing severe deficits in administrative capacity. Schools are being asked to operate food procurement, compliance and financial systems without the staffing, expertise or resources to do so safely or sustainably.⁷

School leaders also described the complexity of EU procurement rules being applied at individual school level. Mr. Eoghan O’Byrne, Principal, St. Mary’ National School, Limerick, stated that:

...it would be remiss of me not to highlight a hugely negative aspect, namely, the dreaded procurement process. The workload, pressure and administrative burden placed on schools have been excessive and, frankly, unfair. Schools should not be expected to navigate complex procurement systems independently. All vendors should be pre-approved by the Department of social inclusion and far greater

⁶ The Catholic Primary School Management Association, Joint Committee on Education and Youth - [Debate](#): 14 January 2026.

⁷ Educate Together, [Opening Statement](#), 14 January 2026, p 2.

*practical support must be provided to school leaders and administrators to negate this burden.*⁸

Furthermore, Mr. O’Byrne informed the Committee that Principals are:

*...expected to look at food safety management, HACCP, the financial ability of the companies, environmental considerations and nutritional quality. As educators, we do not have the necessary expertise and I will say that openly. Our expertise is in the education field and special needs and that kind of stuff. The process is totally bureaucratic and full of red tape. Ours is a medium-sized school, the same as Mr. McCarthy’s. We are expected to look at three different procurement tenders. We have to give feedback to all three and the two unsuccessful ones are entitled to come back at us to review their scoring system.*⁹

This concern was also reflected in written evidence provided to the Committee by the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (the “INTO”), which highlighted that school leaders are increasingly required to undertake complex administrative and compliance tasks associated with the delivery of the Programme, noting that additional administrative supports and clearer procurement arrangements would be required to ensure that the Programme remains sustainable for schools.¹⁰

The Committee further notes the comments of Mr. Mulcrony of the CPSMA regarding the potential benefits of geographically bundled procurement arrangements, as follows:

⁸ Mr. Eoghan O’Byrne, Principal, St. Mary’ National School, Limerick, Joint Committee on Education and Youth - [Debate](#): 28 January 2026.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ The Irish National Teachers’ Organisation, [Submission](#): Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme, 09 January 2026, p.p. 4-5.

About half our schools are led by teaching principals. In effect, they are small schools. Often, they are in isolated locations. They are far away from any provider. They are not an attractive option for large scale providers. However, if we were to procure centrally or on a regional basis and tell providers that we will give them a basket of schools, but among those will be smaller schools that need to be served and that they will have a public service obligation to serve those schools, we could address that particular issue.¹¹

¹¹ The Catholic Primary School Management Association, Joint Committee on Education and Youth - [Debate](#): 14 January 2026.

ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITY AND OPERATIONAL FUNDING

Stakeholder evidence indicated that participation in the School Meals Programme gives rise to significant administrative and operational responsibilities for schools.

For example, Mr. Seamus Mulconry, General Secretary of the CPSMA informed the Committee that the “*State is providing no administrative support for principals to procure or manage the scheme.*”¹²

ET stated to the Committee that:

*Schools require urgent additional funding to cover the real costs associated with delivering the programme, including administration, procurement, utilities, waste disposal, health and safety compliance, and staff supervision. The absence of such funding has transferred disproportionate risk and workload onto school leaders and staff and must be addressed as a matter of priority.*¹³

ET further stated to the Committee that it believes that a new Administration Executive role should be rolled out, as a matter of urgency, in order to better support schools in relation to procurement and contact management.¹⁴

During the Committee’s meeting on 14 January 2026, Dr. Emer Nowlan, CEO, ET stated:

...there is the lack of that administration executive officer role. This is a professional person who is skilled and has capacity and time to manage procurement. If we had that one person in that setting, we

¹² Mr. Seamus Mulconry, General Secretary of the Catholic Primary School Management Association, Joint Committee on Education and Youth - [Debate](#): 14 January 2026.

¹³ Educate Together, [Opening Statement](#), 14 January 2026, p. 9.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 9.

*would be able to share the kitchen and a whole load of other things as well.*¹⁵

The Teachers' Union of Ireland (the "TUI"), in its written submission to the Committee, emphasised the important role that "*key pastoral care staff such as year heads*" can play in supporting students' access to the Programme, so that they can "*make the most of it.*"¹⁶

Similarly, the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (the "NAPD") called for the provision of "*ring-fenced funding for dedicated administrative and supervision staff.*"¹⁷

In a written submission, An Foras Pátrúnachta, a patron body representing Irish-medium schools, similarly highlighted the administrative burden associated with the Programme, noting that the management and distribution of meals can place a significant operational pressure on school offices, particularly in smaller schools.¹⁸

The Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (the "ACCS") similarly highlighted the range of non-food costs and operational demands associated with delivery of the Programme, including utilities, consumables such as wrapping and service ware, refrigeration and storage requirements, and administrative tasks such as monthly returns and projections. It noted that such costs are not consistently covered within the current funding structure and may create additional pressures for schools.¹⁹

¹⁵ Dr. Emer Nowlan, Chief Executive Officer, Educate Together, Joint Committee on Education and Youth - [Debate](#): 14 January 2026.

¹⁶ The Teachers' Union of Ireland, [Response to invitation by the Joint Committee on Education and Youth to make a submission on the review of the School Meals programme](#), January 2026, p. 4.

¹⁷ The National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, [Opening Statement](#), 14 January 2026, p. 2.

¹⁸ An Foras Pátrúnachta, [Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth](#), January 2026, p. 1.

¹⁹ The Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools, [Opening Statement](#), 14 January 2026, p. 4.

In a written submission, the Irish National Teachers Organisation (the “INTO”) similarly emphasised that the administrative and operational demands associated with the Programme require additional supports for schools. The INTO recommended that the State review per-pupil funding rates and administrative supports associated with the Programme in order to reduce the burden placed on school leaders and staff.²⁰

Mr. Conor McCarthy, Principal, Tallaght Community National School (representing Primary Schools in Ballymun, Darndale and Tallaght) stated to the Committee that:

Additional funding should be given to schools for the cost of electricity, cleaning, waste and pest control. At the moment, medium-sized and large schools can rely on the hot meals providers to employ someone to prepare to serve the food but there may come a time in the future when those providers decide that their margins do not allow for this anymore. The hot school meals programme should provide additional funding directly to schools to guarantee a human being in the schools and that this service does not disappear. No additional funding is provided to schools to cover electricity costs or cleaning costs.²¹

Furthermore, during the Committee’s hearing of 28 January 2026, Mr. Eoghan O’Byrne, Principal of St. Mary’s National School, Limerick, informed the Committee of the pressures that outstanding Water Charges bring, with respect to the operation of the Programme. Mr. O’Byrne stated:

In Limerick, there is a constant barrage of questions on who is in high arrears with Irish Water. Nearly every school has an arrears bill of five

²⁰ The Irish National Teachers’ Organisation, [Submission](#): Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme, 09 January 2026, p.p. 4-5.

²¹ Mr. Conor McCarthy, Principal, Tallaght Community National School, Joint Committee on Education and Youth - [Debate](#): 28 January 2026.

*figures and some have arrears bills of nearly six figures. We are talking about €100,000 in some cases. We do not have the money to address this.*²²

²² Mr. Eoghan O'Byrne, Principal, St. Mary' National School, Limerick, Joint Committee on Education and Youth - [Debate](#): 28 January 2026.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND FACILITIES

Evidence supported the contention that continued expansion of the School Meals Programme has implications for the physical infrastructure of schools, including the facilities required for the safe storage, preparation and distribution, and consumption of meals during the school day.

In its opening statement to the Committee, the ACCS highlighted that the expansion of the Programme to post-primary schools raises practical infrastructure considerations and emphasised that schools must have appropriate facilities in place to support meal provision during the school day.²³

Correspondence received by the Committee from schools also reflected these practical concerns. For example, in a written submission, Ms. Muriel Weekes, Principal, St. Joseph's Primary School for Visually Impaired Students, Dublin 9, stated:

*In terms of our school, we have a space issue we don't have any spare space and our options are very limited in terms of location and options - currently taking half of the secretary's office, using part of the staffroom (really limiting the space for staff and the safe space for staff breaks) or by taking away the kitchen area in a classroom. We don't have a stand alone space in the school to facilitate the oven for cooking.*²⁴

Other stakeholders highlighted the practical infrastructure requirements associated with meal provision, including appropriate storage capacity,

²³ The Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools, [Opening Statement](#), 14 January 2026, p. 4.

²⁴ Ms. Muriel Weekes, Principal, St. Joseph's Primary School for Visually Impaired Students, Dublin 9, [Submission](#), 17 February 2026.

refrigeration facilities, areas for meal distribution and suitable spaces where pupils can eat meals.

The JMB stated:

The Joint Managerial Body notes that infrastructure constraints are relevant to the provision of both hot and cold school meals at post-primary level, albeit to differing degrees. While cold meals do not require full kitchen facilities, many schools nonetheless lack appropriate food storage, refrigeration, safe distribution areas and suitable dining spaces, all of which are necessary to deliver meals in a safe, efficient and dignified manner. These limitations reflect the age and original design of much of the post-primary school building stock. As a result, even the expansion of cold meal provision may require capital investment by the State, while the introduction of hot meals would necessitate a more substantial and planned Programme of infrastructure development. From the perspective of the Joint Managerial Body, any review or expansion of the School Meals Programme at post-primary level should therefore be informed by an assessment of infrastructure readiness and supported by appropriate capital resourcing.²⁵

On 14 January 2026, the ACCS also emphasised the importance of appropriate dining environments, noting the value of students sitting together with “*a knife, fork and plate*” as part of a structured communal meal experience.²⁶

²⁵ The Joint Managerial Body, [Written Submission by the Joint Managerial Body to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education on the School Meals Programme at Post-Primary Level](#), January 2026, p. 3.

²⁶ The Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools, Joint Committee on Education and Youth – [Debate](#): 14 January 2026.

The TUI emphasised that the implementation of school meal provision within schools can give rise to additional operational and supervisory considerations that must be reflected in how facilities and school spaces are organised.²⁷

School meal providers also highlighted the infrastructure limitations within the existing school estate. In a written submission, Glanmore Foods stated that many schools lack kitchens, preparation areas, or suitable dining facilities and that providers are frequently required to supply equipment such as ovens, refrigeration, sinks and waste systems in order to deliver meals safely.²⁸

In January 2026, a delegation of the Committee undertook a Study Visit to examine Primary and Post Primary Education in Finland. A key observation in schools was that school meals are prepared on-site and served in dedicated dining facilities designed to accommodate communal eating within the school day. This reflects the integration of meal provision as part of a Whole School approach that promotes Food Culture and Food Education.²⁹

²⁷ The Teachers' Union of Ireland, [Response to invitation by the Joint Committee on Education and Youth to make a submission on the review of the School Meals programme](#), January 2026, p. 4.

²⁸ Glanmore Foods, [Glanmore Food's Written Submission as part of the Committee's Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme](#), February 2026, p. 2.

²⁹ The Joint Committee on Education and Youth, [Travel Report on a Study Visit to examine the Primary and Post Primary Education System and Youth Work in Finland](#), February 2026, p. 11.

DIGITAL SUPPORTS

Evidence received by the Committee referred to the potential role that digital systems could play in supporting programme administration.

As the Programme has expanded significantly in recent years, schools are required to manage a range of operational tasks associated with meal provision, including procurement processes, coordination with suppliers, monitoring pupil participation and administering aspects of programme delivery at school level.

Evidence presented to the Committee indicates that these responsibilities contribute to the broader administrative workload experienced by school leaders in participating schools.

For example, in its opening statement to the Committee, ET highlighted the scale of administrative responsibilities associated with the Programme and stated that:

The most serious challenge is the administrative and procurement burden placed on schools. In nearly three-quarters of our schools, principals themselves are managing procurement. This typically takes several days over a number of weeks, followed by an ongoing weekly administrative workload of around five hours – or more.³⁰

Similar operational considerations were reflected in a written submission provided by St. Ultan's Primary School, Dublin 10, which described the structured coordination required to manage meal provision and student participation within the school day.³¹

³⁰ Educate Together, [Opening Statement](#), 14 January 2026, p. 2.

³¹ St. Ultan's Primary School, [Submission to the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Youth February 2026 Food Provision in Schools: St Ultan's Campus Integrated Model](#), February 2026, pp. 3-5.

Apridata, a provider of school meal management systems, demonstrated how digital systems can assist schools by supporting the centralised management of meal ordering, attendance data and supplier coordination, while also providing improved programme oversight.³²

Apridata further noted that digital systems can assist in reducing food waste by allowing schools and suppliers to more accurately match meal preparation with pupil participation.³³

The National Parents Council (the “NPC”) highlighted practical issues arising in relation to meal ordering and pupil participation. In its survey of parents and children relating to the Hot School Meals Scheme, the NPC reported concerns regarding instances where meals are prepared but not consumed, which respondents linked to participation and ordering arrangements within schools.³⁴

Food Village, in its submission to the Committee, also highlighted the role of digital systems in improving operational efficiency and reducing food waste, noting that predictive ordering systems can allow providers to match meal production more accurately to demand. Food Village reported operating with less than 2% daily food wastage using such systems.³⁵

³² Apridata, [Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme](#), February 2026, p. 2.

³³ *Ibid*, pp. 3-4.

³⁴ The National Parents’ Council, [Parents’ and Children’s Perspectives on the Hot School Meals Scheme Survey](#), 14 January 2026, pp. 22-198.

³⁵ Food Village, [Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth: Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme](#), 04 February 2026, p. 1.

RISING COSTS

Several stakeholders submitted evidence to the Committee in respect of the rising costs associated with administering the Programme.

The IWGSMP confirmed that the current funding for schools is a rate of €3.20 per meal for Hot School Meals.³⁶ Furthermore, it stated that funding provided under the School Meals programme is “solely for food”.³⁷

In a written submission, the INTO referred to the need to review the rates per pupil, in the context of the Programme. The INTO noted:

Adequate funding for school meals programmes is extremely important. According to the Global Child Nutrition Foundation, survey respondents were asked to report whether the program budget was “adequate” to achieve the program’s targets, with the definition of adequacy left to interpretation. In the Irish context, since January 2023 the rate per pupil per day is €3.20 for hot school meals. However, data from the CSO in the intervening years has found that:

- *the Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose by 4.6% between December 2022 and December 2023, up from an annual increase of 3.9% in the 12 months to November 2023;*
- *the CPI rose by 1.4% between December 2023 and December 2024, up from an annual increase of 1.0% in the 12 months to November 2024;*
- *the CPI rose by 3.2% on average between November 2024 and November 2025.*

³⁶ The Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme, [Brief on the School Meals Programme](#), 20 November 2025, p. 1.

³⁷ The Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme, [Opening Statement](#), 20 November 2025, p. 2.

The INTO recommends that the rates per pupil should be reviewed periodically particularly in light of the CPI to ensure that meals can continue to be purchased to a nutritional high standard and the quantity of the meal does not diminish in any way.³⁸

Similarly, St. Ultan's Primary School, Dublin 10, in a written submission, highlighted the pressure that rising costs are putting on the delivery of the Programme. For example, it highlighted that there has been a notable increase in the costs of foods required for the delivery of the Programme, when comparing costs in 2023 to those in 2026.³⁹

Parents also highlighted the effect that rising costs can have in respect of the delivery of the Programme. For instance, Ms Sharon Graham, a parent whose children are attending a small rural school, noted the following:

As you will be aware, the State currently funds the scheme at €3.20 per child per day. For a school with 20 pupils, this totals €64 per day. This funding must cover ingredients, preparation, cooking, storage, transport, delivery, and now, additionally, the cost of a trained on-site staff member. For smaller schools like ours, this makes the delivery of hot meals financially unviable for providers, resulting in exclusion from a programme intended to support all children equally.⁴⁰

Furthermore, in its submission to the Committee, Food Policy Ireland requested “a breakdown of how the €3.20 per school meal is spent by

³⁸ The Irish National Teachers' Organisation, [Submission](#): Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme, 09 January 2026, p.p. 5-6.

³⁹ St. Ultan's Primary School, [Submission to the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Youth February 2026 Food Provision in Schools: St Ultan's Campus Integrated Model](#), February 2026, p 17.

⁴⁰ Ms Sharon Graham, Parent, [Submission](#), 23 January 2026.

providers; what percentage is on food ingredients / labour / overheads / delivery and logistics / marketing / profit.”⁴¹

School meal providers also highlighted the effect that rising costs are having on the viability of the continued delivery of the Programme. In this regard, the Lunch Bag noted:

Because the €3.20 is not index linked, additional rising social welfare costs threaten all suppliers. Increased sick days, minimum wage and auto enrolment have all been introduced since the hot meal scheme started. This is in addition to rising food, fuel, rents, rate costs, notwithstanding the supplier must also manage all waste removal, complete overwhelming tenders...⁴²

⁴¹ Food Policy Ireland, [More than a Meal - How Ireland's School Meals can nourish children, economically empower local communities, and stimulate ecological agriculture - the triple-win](#), 05 February 2026, p. 5.

⁴² The Lunch Bag, [Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth](#), February 2026, p. 3.

RECOMMENDATIONS: RESOURCES AND DELIVERY

1. Responsibility for the School Meals Programme should be moved to the Department of Education and Youth as an urgent national priority with the commensurate budget and an expanded unit. The unit must be properly resourced and include dedicated professional staff, i.e. Procurement Specialists, Dieticians/Nutrition experts, *et al*, who are directly employed by the Department.
2. Individual schools that are in arrears with Uisce Éireann, with respect to water charges, should have those charges cancelled. Going forward, all primary and post primary schools should be exempt from paying water charges.
3. The Department of Education and Youth should circulate a Pre-Approved List of Suppliers by County to all School Principals by Q3 2026. In advance, specific criteria for approval should be published and an invitation to Suppliers for inclusion on the list should be published on the Department's website.
4. The Department of Education and Youth should establish a new Executive School Support Officer (ESSO) role to undertake administrative duties in Primary schools separate to the School Secretary post. The role would include, *inter alia*, coordination of the School Meals Programme and other relevant tasks. It would be an Executive Officer equivalent role, with the commensurate pay and conditions. Individual Officers could be shared between several schools depending on school size. The funding model for this role should be

directly allocated by the Department of Education and Youth, ring-fenced from the general school budget, to ensure that the position does not create an additional financial burden on schools or Boards of Management.

5. The Department of Education and Youth should establish Posts of Responsibility for *School Meals and Food Education Coordinators*, in Primary and Post Primary schools.
6. A Kitchen and Dining/Canteen Area should be mandatory in all New School Building Specifications. It should be wholly separate from Multi-Purpose Rooms contained in the Specifications.
7. The Inter Departmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme should, within six months of this report's publication, produce a feasibility study and implementation plan for the role that digital systems may play in supporting the administration and delivery of the School Meals Programme. Specifically, it should: (i) progress the development or adoption of digital systems to support meal ordering and programme administration within schools, (ii) consider the integration of such systems, where appropriate, with school attendance and participation data, (iii) examine the potential role of digital tools in supporting programme monitoring and evaluation, and (iv) assess the data protection implications of integrating such systems with student records and recommend a secure data governance framework.

8. The Inter Departmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme should review the current costings model to reflect the reality that the current payment per meal may not be enough to provide high quality nutritious meals.

CHAPTER 2: NUTRITION AND WELLBEING

Extensive evidence concerned the nutritional quality, health impact and overall meal experience associated with the School Meals Programme. Stakeholders addressed both the existing regulatory framework governing nutritional standards and the practical implementation of those standards in schools.

REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

Ms. Fiona Ward, of the IWGSMP advised that standards for school meals were devised to support healthy eating and to address public health concerns, based on guidelines developed by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (the “FSAI”). Ms. Ward noted that a review of existing standards is underway and that more detailed nutritional analysis is being progressed, subject to receipt of menu and ingredient information from suppliers.⁴³

Notwithstanding this, the Committee received evidence raising concerns about the nutritional quality of meals in practice, including the level of highly processed foods and the lack of transparency regarding production methods. In her opening statement to the Committee, Dr. Darina Allen stated that *“ultra-processed foods dominate many school meals”* and warned that the current delivery model operates with *“very little transparency about how meals are produced”*.⁴⁴ Dr. Allen opined that in some cases *“pre-cooked, ultra-processed components are assembled, sealed in single-use packaging and reheated multiple times”*.⁴⁵

Some witnesses proposed that there be a national audit to ascertain the true nature of the food provided, its provenance, whether it is cooked from

⁴³ The Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme, Joint Committee on Education and Youth – [Debate](#): 20 November 2025.

⁴⁴ Dr. Darina Allen, Joint Committee on Education and Youth – [Debate](#): 22 January 2026.

⁴⁵ Dr. Darina Allen, [Opening Statement](#), 22 January 2026, p. 3.

scratch, and how it is delivered. Ms. Áine Lynch, CEO of the NPC stated that *“...we need a national audit of what is happening, what the levels of highly processed foods are, where areas are doing it without high processed foods, and how they are doing it.”*⁴⁶

Ms Louise Bayliss, Head of Social Justice and Policy at the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (the “SVP”) emphasised the importance of using audit data to ensure the funding model for the Programme supports nutritious provision, warning against a situation where schools are *“left saying that the only providers that can and will do it are giving ultra-processed foods.”*⁴⁷

An NPC report illustrated the findings of two surveys relating to the School Meals Programme. The NPC received 3,411 responses (2,465 from parents and 946 from children). The research showed that the most frequent parental concern related to food quality, with parents reporting meals they described as *“over-processed”* and raising worries about *“an over-reliance on processed foods”*, alongside calls for tighter standards and regular audits to ensure quality and consistency.⁴⁸

Concerns regarding the nutritional quality of school meals were also reflected in written submissions from children’s rights and public health stakeholders. The Ombudsman for Children’s Office (the “OCO”) emphasised the importance of ensuring that school meal programmes deliver consistently nutritious food and highlighted the need for appropriate monitoring and oversight mechanisms to safeguard children’s health and wellbeing.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ The National Parents’ Council, Joint Committee on Education and Youth – [Debate](#): 22 January 2026.

⁴⁷ The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Joint Committee on Education and Youth – [Debate](#): 22 January 2026.

⁴⁸ The National Parents’ Council, [Parents’ and Children’s Perspectives on the Hot School Meals Scheme Survey](#), 14 January 2026, p. 16.

⁴⁹ The Ombudsman for Children’s Office, [Evaluating the Impacts of the Hot School Meals Programme, Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth](#), January 2026, pp. 2-3.

Evidence from meal providers also highlighted ongoing efforts to improve the nutritional quality of school meals. Glanmore Foods noted it has undertaken a programme of menu reformulation which has resulted in reductions of approximately 10% in salt content, 14% in total fat and 9% in saturated fat across its main hot food menu, alongside the removal of MSG and the elimination of dishes classified as high in fat, sugar and salt.⁵⁰

Similarly, the Lunch Bag stated that suppliers have worked with dietitians and food producers to reformulate products in order to reduce salt, sugar and fat while maintaining meals that are acceptable to children.⁵¹

Furthermore, in a written submission, the National Dairy Council (the “NDC”) informed the Committee that, according to research undertaken by the NDC in 2024, “...almost 9 in 10 parents welcomed the Hot School Meals initiative and over half thought that milk should be included.”⁵² The NDC also referred to alternative research that it funded, which found that “...only 4% of Irish teenagers are meeting the Department of Health guidelines of five servings of dairy a day. At the same time, 51% are deficient in calcium.”⁵³

⁵⁰ Glanmore Foods, [Glanmore Food’s Written Submission as part of the Committee’s Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme](#), February 2026, p. 1.

⁵¹ The Lunch Bag, [Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth](#), February 2026, p. 3.

⁵² The National Dairy Council, [Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth on the Evaluation of the Impacts of the Hot School Meals Programme](#), 18 March 2026, p. 1.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 2.

PORTION SIZES

Evidence contended that portion sizes are not consistently aligned to pupils' age and stage of development, with stakeholders indicating that identical portions are sometimes provided across wide age ranges, contributing both to hunger among older pupils and waste among younger children.

The NPC reported that “*portion sizes were a major issue, with the same amount of food given to junior infants and sixth-class pupils,*” which parents linked directly to waste and to older children remaining hungry.⁵⁴ The NPC's qualitative responses include direct parental remarks such as:

- “*A larger portion of food for the older kids, my 6th class is always hungry...*”;⁵⁵ and
- “*The portions are too small and what's provided is not a complete meal...*”⁵⁶

A written submission from Pavee Point Roma and Traveller Centre also identifies “*insufficient portion sizes*” as a key challenge and recommends increasing portion sizes to ensure children are adequately nourished throughout the school day.⁵⁷

The Association of Teachers of Home Economics (the “ATHE”) similarly highlighted that, while standards envisage age-appropriate portions, “*in practice... the same portion size is provided to both junior infant pupils and sixth-class students,*” which it stated does not reflect differing nutritional needs.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ The National Parents' Council, [Parents' and Children's Perspectives on the Hot School Meals Scheme Survey](#), 14 January 2026, p. 16.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 135.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 135.

⁵⁷ Pavee Point Roma and Traveller Centre, [Submission to the Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Youth as part of the Committee's Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme](#), 09 January 2026, p. 3.

⁵⁸ The Association of Home Economics Teachers, [Opening Statement](#), 22 January 2026, p. 2.

Concerns regarding the adequacy and suitability of meals for children were also reflected in submissions from children’s advocacy organisations. For example, the Children’s Rights Alliance (the “CRA”) emphasised that school meal provision should ensure that children receive meals that meet their nutritional needs and support their wellbeing and ability to participate fully in the school day.⁵⁹

Furthermore, a written submission by Food Village, a national secondary school meals provider operating in 127 schools, notes that secondary school pupils have higher caloric and portion requirements than primary pupils, typically requiring meals of approximately 400-450g compared with 250g at primary level.⁶⁰

On 20 November 2025, Ms. Fiona Ward, of the IWGSMP, stated that part of its nutritional analysis work is to ensure that “*portion sizes... are appropriate for different age groups,*” and linked this explicitly to reducing food waste and managing cost.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Children’s Rights Alliance, [Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth: Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme](#), 09 January 2026, p. 2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁶¹ The Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme, Joint Committee on Education and Youth – [Debate](#): 20 November 2025.

INCLUSIVITY

The Committee received evidence that the School Meals Programme must accommodate religious dietary requirements, as well as culturally appropriate provision.

In its submission, the Muslim Primary Education Board (the “MPEB”) stated that it was necessary *“to ensure that the unique needs of students requiring religious dietary accommodation are acknowledged and addressed across the entire school system.”*⁶²

The MPEB further emphasised that *“halal requirements extend beyond the provision of halal-certified meat”* and encompass *“All animal-derived menu ingredients (including gelatine in desserts, rennet in cheese, animal-based emulsifiers, stocks, and flavourings)”*, as well as *“Processing and preparation areas to prevent cross-contamination”* and *“Traceability of ingredients throughout the supply chain.”*⁶³

The MPEB also highlighted the absence of national guidance, stating: *“our schools report a lack of clear, specific guidance on accommodating religious dietary requirements”* and that the Programme *“depends entirely on individual school capacity, principal expertise, and local supplier availability—creating a postcode lottery for religious accommodation.”*⁶⁴

The MPEB concluded that *“A truly universal programme must ensure that children in any Irish primary school can access verified halal provision with the same confidence, choice, and quality as their peers.”*⁶⁵

⁶² The Muslim Primary Education Board, [MPEB Submission to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Youth - Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme](#), January 2026, p. 2.

⁶³ *Ibid*, pp. 2-3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p 5.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 8.

Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, identified “*Cultural inappropriateness of some meals*” among the “*Key Challenges Identified*.”⁶⁶

Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre recommended that the Programme should: “*Ensure menus are culturally inclusive, reflecting the diversity of school communities, including Traveller and Roma children*.”⁶⁷

In evidence on wider dietary needs, Educate Together stated that meals should have “*greater flexibility to cater for allergies, dietary requirements, sensory sensitivities and restrictive eating needs*.”⁶⁸

Evidence from the National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (the “NABMSE”) similarly noted that “*where meals do not align with pupils’ sensory preferences, cultural expectations or individual needs, uptake decreases and food waste increases*.”⁶⁹

Concerns were raised regarding the need to ensure school meals programmes are inclusive and accessible to all children were also reflected in submissions from children’s rights stakeholders. The OCO emphasised the importance of ensuring that school food programmes operate in a manner that allows all children to participate fully and benefit equally from the provision.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Pavee Point Roma and Traveller Centre, [Submission to the Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Youth as part of the Committee’s Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme](#), 09 January 2026, p. 3.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁶⁸ Educate Together, [Opening Statement](#), 14 January 2026, p. 9.

⁶⁹ The National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education, [Opening Statement](#), 14 January 2026, p. 4.

⁷⁰ The Ombudsman for Children’s Office, [Evaluating the Impacts of the Hot School Meals Programme, Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth](#), January 2026, pp. 3-4.

TIMING PROVISIONS

Several stakeholders opined that, in many schools, the practical logistics of distributing hot meals can significantly reduce pupils' time to eat, with implications for nutrition, waste, and the overall wellbeing benefits of the Programme.

Referring to the findings of its two surveys on the School Meals Programme, the NPC noted that parents opined that *“lunch breaks are too short—sometimes only 10 minutes—so children rush or skip eating to play.”*⁷¹

Furthermore, the NPC's qualitative responses include direct parental remarks such as:

- *“Mandated yard time means even if it was delicious, the younger kids, eg Junior Infants will always choose yard time over food time. How about protected lunch (EATING) time.”*,⁷²
- *“I think the breaks are too short in school for eating time, my daughter complains about this.”*,⁷³ and
- *“I think the scheme is a good idea but wonder about whether children will be given enough time to eat their meals? As it stands, my children get 5-10 minutes of eating time for their packed lunch after yard time.”*⁷⁴

On 14 January 2026, Mr. Mark McDonald, director of schools at the Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board, representing ETBI, stated:

If a student has to be served lunch there are logistics of queuing, speed of delivery of the meal and erosion of break time. For those who are not at the front of the queue, that can be a serious amount of time.

⁷¹ The National Parents' Council, [Parents' and Children's Perspectives on the Hot School Meals Scheme Survey](#), 14 January 2026, p. 11.

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 59.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 69.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 161.

*There are also increased supervision demands on teachers. These have to be managed at school level and are not insignificant.*⁷⁵

Evidence was provided on the wider wellbeing benefits of an appropriate meal environment, including the social and communal experience of eating together. On 14 January 2026, Mr. Paul Thornton, Assistant General Secretary of the ACCS stated:

*The communal and social aspect is so important. It is happening in a number of our schools...The communal aspect does not happen in students' lives other than this...They sit and they have to have a knife, fork and plate. They all have their places and they must sit for lunch because that is more than likely the only time they will do that in their daily or weekly lives. The social value in that is incalculable. We cannot put a number on it.*⁷⁶

The NABMSE further linked the meal environment to reduced waste and wider wellbeing benefits, stating “...when students are eating off plates, there is less waste. There is no packaging, the dishes are washed and ready for the next day and the students have had the communal experience, a social gathering.”⁷⁷

Evidence from school meal providers also highlighted the operational constraints associated with serving large cohorts of post-primary pupils within short break periods. Food Village informed the Committee that service systems

⁷⁵ Mr. Mark McDonald, Education and Training Boards Ireland, Joint Committee on Education and Youth – [Debate](#): 14 January 2026.

⁷⁶ The Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools, Joint Committee on Education and Youth – [Debate](#): 14 January 2026.

⁷⁷ The National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education, Joint Committee on Education and Youth – [Debate](#): 14 January 2026.

must be capable of feeding schools of up to 1,000 students within a 15-minute break to function effectively.⁷⁸

FOOD EDUCATION AND WHOLE-SCHOOL FOOD CULTURE

The overriding evidence supports the contention that the School Meals Programme presents a significant opportunity to strengthen children’s food and nutrition education and to build healthier lifelong dietary habits.

Dr. Darina Allen stated that there “*is also a huge, missed opportunity to integrate food education into the school day - teaching children where food comes from, how to grow food, cook food and eat well.*”⁷⁹

On 22 January 2026, the Mr. Denis Carrigan, Public Relations Officer of the ATHE stated:

*We have a great opportunity in this programme, as we roll it out in secondary schools, to educate students about nutrition. Home economics should be a mandatory subject at junior level to counteract what the Deputy was talking about in regard to these fads, such as protein. There are always fads going around. Low fat used to be the thing and now protein is the thing. Home economics education for all at junior certificate level and even in primary school is really important to counteract that.*⁸⁰

Mr. Carrigan also proposed that “*it could link to the SPHE element in the context of well-being, ensuring pupils are getting the nutrition they need every*

⁷⁸ Food Village, [Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth: Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme](#), 04 February 2026, p. 3.

⁷⁹ Dr. Darina Allen, [Opening Statement](#), 22 January 2026, p. 2.

⁸⁰ The Association of Home Economics Teachers, Joint Committee on Education and Youth: [Debate](#), 22 January 2026.

*day, etc...It does not even have to be home economics as it could be a lesser version specific to nutrition”.*⁸¹

Dr Maria O’Sullivan, Associate Professor in Nutrition; Director (Dep) BSc. Nutrition and Dietetics, Trinity College Dublin stated that *“The school meals programme provides opportunities to: Embed practical learning and activities on healthy diets, local food, sustainability and climate, and involve students in their design.”*⁸²

Written evidence from St. Ultan’s Primary School similarly emphasised the importance of embedding food education within everyday school life and highlighted the value of practical engagement with food, including preparation and shared meals, as a means of helping children develop a positive informed relationship with food.⁸³

RECOMMENDATIONS: NUTRITION AND WELLBEING

9. The Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme should publish a policy paper on the content of School Meals, to include specifications such as:

- Age appropriate portion size,
- Nutritional specifications of food, and possible inclusion of drinks,
- Elimination of highly processed foods,
- Maximum use of local ingredients,
- Culturally inclusive menus, and

⁸¹ The Association of Home Economics Teachers, Joint Committee on Education and Youth: [Debate](#), 22 January 2026.

⁸² Professor Maria O’Sullivan, Associate Professor in Nutrition; Director (Dep) BSc. Nutrition and Dietetics, Trinity College Dublin, [Opening Statement](#), 28 January 2026, p. 1.

⁸³ St. Ultan’s Primary School, [Submission to the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Youth February 2026 Food Provision in Schools: St Ultan’s Campus Integrated Model](#), February 2026, pp. 2-3.

- Menus for students with additional educational needs and/or dietary requirements.

This policy paper should be subject to a public consultation process, including dedicated sessions with students, parents, and small/community food producers, and must be approved by the Minister for Education and Youth. The specifications will become mandatory for all schools and suppliers participating in the Programme within 12 months of publication.

The specifications in this document should be incorporated into the procurement process, as a key measure to ensure all students receive nutritional meals appropriate to their needs.

10. Food Education and a Whole School Food Culture that respects and understands that food is fundamentally important must be integral to the School Meals Programme. To this end, all primary schools should have a Food Education Policy and Food Education should be part of all Whole School Evaluations.

11. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment should, within 12 months, publish a report with concrete recommendations for implementation on:

- Adapting the primary school curriculum to allow students enough time to eat their school meal with their peers,

- Integrating Food Education into the key subject areas of the curriculum,
- Making Home Economics a mandatory subject in all primary and post primary schools as part of the SPHE/Wellbeing Programmes and as a core Transition Year (TY) module in post primary education, and
- Developing continuous professional development (CPD) modules for teachers to support the integration of Food Education across the curriculum.

CHAPTER 3: ACCESS AND INCLUSION

Evidence highlighted the importance of ensuring that the School Meals Programme is accessible to all pupils and that barriers to participation are addressed. Witnesses emphasised that access to nutritious meals during the school day can support pupils' wellbeing, educational participation and equality of opportunity, particularly for children experiencing food insecurity. The Committee also heard evidence that the continued expansion of the Programme should take account of issues relating to inclusion, stigma and access across different school settings.

EXPANSION TO POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Evidence showed strong support for extending the School Meals Programme to pupils attending post-primary schools.

In its opening statement to the Committee, the SVP highlighted the scale of food insecurity experienced by families and the importance of school-based meal provision in addressing child food poverty. The SVP informed the Committee that “*food remains the biggest driver of need*”, noting that the organisation received over 112,000 requests for food assistance in 2025.⁸⁴

In this context, the SVP emphasised the importance of school meals in supporting children experiencing food poverty and stated that “*...the provision of free hot school meals is an important tool to mitigate against the negative impacts of food poverty among children.*”⁸⁵

The SVP also expressed strong support for expanding the Programme to post-primary schools and stated “*...we would strongly support an expansion*

⁸⁴ The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, [Opening Statement](#), 22 January 2026, p. 1.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 2.

of the Hot School Meals programme to all students in second level education.”⁸⁶

The NAPD highlighted the challenges that arise when pupils transition from primary to post-primary schools and lose access to hot meals. The NAPD stated:

When students transfer from primary to post-primary schools, many students will be told there is no access to hot meals in their school. This causes disappointment and frustration among students and parents alike, and it has resulted in numerous difficult conversations for school leaders.

Students have a legitimate expectation that they will receive a hot meal throughout their whole school career. And here is the reality, food poverty doesn't cease when children turn twelve. Adolescents' nutritional needs increase significantly during this developmental stage. Yet the current structure abandons students precisely when their caloric requirements grow and their capacity to concentrate through long academic days becomes paramount.⁸⁷

Evidence from school management organisations similarly highlighted the potential benefits of extending the Programme to post-primary settings. The JMB indicated that school meal provision can support pupils' wellbeing and participation in the school day and highlighted the opportunity presented by the Programme's expansion to post-primary schools.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, [Opening Statement](#), 22 January 2026, p. 3.

⁸⁷ The National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, [Opening Statement](#), 14 January 2026, p. 1.

⁸⁸ The Joint Managerial Body, [Written Submission by the Joint Managerial Body to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education on the School Meals Programme at Post-Primary Level](#), January 2026, p. 3.

Food Village’s submission further notes that large-scale post-primary meal provision is already operational in practice. Food Village reported that it currently serves a registered base of 85,000 students nationwide, with approximately 15,000 students ordering meal daily.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Food Village, [Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth: Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme](#), 04 February 2026, p. 1.

UNIVERSAL ACCESS

The Committee received evidence from stakeholders highlighting the importance of universal access to the School Meals Programme, particularly in reducing stigma and ensuring that children experiencing food insecurity are able to participate.

For instance, Barnardos emphasised the practical benefits of school meal provision for children experiencing poverty. In its opening statement to the Committee at the Committee's meeting on 22 January 2026, Barnardos stated:

The parents we support are overwhelming happy with the hot school meals provided to their children and repeatedly state they and their children experience significant benefits as a result of their introduction, while staff see significant value for children they are working with. The main positives parents and staff focus on are as follows:

-Every child is guaranteed a hot meal every day they are in school. Without the programme not all children we support would receive one, because of poverty and parental adversities. Hot school meals significantly improve the nutrition of many children, in a way that is not stigmatising. Parents can discuss wide ranging food options in a positive and non-stressful manner with their children while they choose options from the menu, rather than what could otherwise be repetitive and less healthy choices...⁹⁰

Submissions from children's rights organisations also highlighted the importance of universal provision in supporting children's wellbeing and

⁹⁰ Barnardos, [Opening Statement](#), 22 January 2026, p. 1.

reducing stigma. In its submission to the Committee, the CRA noted that “The universality of the programme also helps to reduce the stigma associated with accepting meals.”⁹¹

Evidence submitted to the Committee by the NPC also reflected parental support for the Programme. Survey responses gathered by the NPC indicated that parents considered the School Meals Programme to promote fairness and equality within schools, with respondents highlighting that it can “*promote fairness and equal access for all children.*”⁹²

On 14 January 2026, concerns were raised regarding the impact of procurement criteria on smaller providers. For instance, in respect of small schools, the CPSMA stated that they are often “*...in isolated locations. They are far away from any provider. They are not an attractive option for large scale providers.*”⁹³

Similarly, the INTO, in a submission, informed the Committee that “*...the INTO has been made aware of a number of smaller schools particularly in the midlands and Clare/Galway who, despite putting out a call to tender, have been unable to secure any tenders and therefore remain unable to participate in this programme.*”⁹⁴

On 20 November 2025, during scrutiny of procurement criteria in respect of the Programme, concerns were raised regarding the condition that providers demonstrate evidence of having secured previous contracts equivalent to

⁹¹ Children’s Rights Alliance, [Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth: Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme](#), 09 January 2026, p. 3.

⁹² The National Parents’ Council, [Parents’ and Children’s Perspectives on the Hot School Meals Scheme Survey](#), 14 January 2026, p. 14.

⁹³ The Catholic Primary School Management Association, Joint Committee on Education and Youth - [Debate](#): 14 January 2026.

⁹⁴ The Irish National Teachers’ Organisation, [Submission: Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme](#), 09 January 2026, p. 6.

60% of the meal volume required by the school for which a provider is tendering.

The IWGSMP confirmed that the 60% requirement could be met through contracts secured with other organisations, not just schools, and this measure is intended to provide assurance of provider capacity.⁹⁵

It should be noted, however, that the updated procurement documentation states clearly:

For the avoidance of doubt, each previous contract example does not have to meet the 60% threshold. A Tenderer may submit more than three previous contracts that when combined meet the 60% threshold (over the same period of time).⁹⁶

Concerns were also raised that, as the Programme expands, scale requirements may increasingly favour larger operators.

In a written submission, Food Policy Ireland warned that the current delivery model risks favouring “*large-scale, for-profit industrialised food production approaches*”, and cautioned that the Programme could inadvertently embed long supply chains and reduce opportunities for smaller or community-based providers.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ The Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme, Joint Committee on Education and Youth - [Debate](#): 20 November 2025.

⁹⁶ [Appendix 3](#).

⁹⁷ Food Policy Ireland, [More than a Meal - How Ireland's School Meals can nourish children, economically empower local communities, and stimulate ecological agriculture - the triple-win](#), 05 February 2026, p. 1.

EXTENDING SUPPORTS

The Committee received evidence that many children who benefit from the School Meals Programme during the school year may experience food insecurity during school holiday periods when regular school-based meal provision is unavailable.

In its opening statement to the Committee, the CRA highlighted the importance of addressing this issue and recommended that Government *“Extend a modified version of the School Meals Programme beyond term time to address holiday hunger; build on pilots.”*⁹⁸

In its opening statement to the Committee, the SVP highlighted the scale of food insecurity experienced by families and the importance of school-based meal provision in addressing child food poverty. The SVP informed the Committee that *“food remains the biggest driver of need”*, noting that the organisation received over 112,000 requests for food assistance in 2025.⁹⁹

The Committee also received evidence from child welfare organisations highlighting the broader relationship between food insecurity and child wellbeing. In its opening statement to the Committee on 22 January 2026, Barnardos emphasised the importance of ensuring that children experiencing disadvantage have consistent access to nutritious food, noting that without school-based provision many vulnerable children may struggle to access regular meals.¹⁰⁰

The Committee also heard evidence regarding existing initiatives which partially address this issue. During the Committee’s hearing on 20 November 2025, Mr. Simon Shevlin Principal Officer and Chairperson of the IWGSMP

⁹⁸ Children’s Rights Alliance, [Opening Statement](#), 22 January 2026, p. 5.

⁹⁹ The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, [Opening Statement](#), 22 January 2026, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰ Barnardos, [Opening Statement](#), 22 January 2026, p. 1.

outlined how meal provision has been incorporated into the Summer Programme, stating:

Around 40,000 children participate in the summer school programme. If those schools are already on the school meals programme, they can actually give school meals to children for those two or three weeks during the summer school programme.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ The Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme, Joint Committee on Education and Youth – [Debate](#): 20 November 2025.

INVOLVEMENT OF STUDENTS AND PARENTS

Evidence highlighted the importance of ensuring that students and parents are meaningfully involved in the operation and continued development of the School Meals Programme.

In a submission received by the Committee, the NPC emphasised the importance of parents being active partners in their children's education and being valued in decisions that affect their children and families. The NPC also highlighted the importance of regular, open and meaningful communication with parents and of building strategies to ensure that both parents and children are integral to educational policy and practice.¹⁰²

Submissions to the Committee also highlighted the importance of child participation and a rights-based approach to decisions affecting children's wellbeing. The OCO emphasised that the rights and welfare of children and young people should be fully protected in this area.¹⁰³

Evidence provided by Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre highlighted the importance of inclusive participation by parents, schools and communities in the design and delivery of the Programme. It specifically recommends strengthening the consultation and participation of schools, parents and communities in programme design and delivery, and embedding the Programme within a whole-school health, wellbeing and food education network.¹⁰⁴

The NABMSE also highlighted the importance of structured student and parent involvement. In its opening statement, it stated that international and

¹⁰² The National Parents' Council, [Parents' and Children's Perspectives on the Hot School Meals Scheme Survey](#), 14 January 2026, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰³ The Ombudsman for Children's Office, [Evaluating the Impacts of the Hot School Meals Programme. Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth](#), January 2026, p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ Pavee Point Roma and Traveller Centre, [Submission to the Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Youth as part of the Committee's Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme](#), 09 January 2026, p. 3.

national school nutrition research shows that student involvement in menu planning within healthy eating guidelines can lead to higher uptake, reduced waste and better nutritional outcomes.¹⁰⁵ The NABMSE also recommended that student voice and parental engagement should be embedded as core principles of the Programme.¹⁰⁶

In a written submission, An Foras Pátrúnachta also highlighted the importance of engaging with students in relation to food choices within schools. Its submission noted that suppliers are increasingly working with student councils to promote healthier options, although encouraging pupils to adopt these options can present practical challenges in some schools settings.¹⁰⁷

On 28 January 2026, Ms. Áine O’Leary, Student, St Mary’s Secondary School, Macroom, County Cork, also provided evidence illustrating the value of engaging directly with students on issues such as school meal update and food waste, demonstrating the practical insights that pupils themselves can bring to discussions on school food provision.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ The National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education, [Opening Statement](#), 14 January 2026, p. 4.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁷ An Foras Pátrúnachta, [Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth](#), January 2026, p. 1.

¹⁰⁸ Ms. Áine O’Leary, Student, St Mary’s Secondary School, Macroom, County Cork, Joint Committee on Education and Youth - [Debate](#): 28 January 2026.

RECOMMENDATIONS: ACCESS AND INCLUSION

12. The School Meals Programme should be rolled out to all Post Primary Schools and Centres of Education as an urgent national priority.
13. Universal Access must be enshrined in the School Meals Programme expansion to reduce any stigma. In addition, small rural schools must be supported to ensure that the School Meals Programme is fully operational in those schools.
14. Given that many small rural schools in remote areas struggle to engage a supplier, there should be either:
 - a) A cluster of schools bundled into the one contract; or,
 - b) Small rural/remote schools should be bundled into a contract with larger urban schools.
15. Schools should be utilised as a key resource in Government Policy to alleviate food poverty during holiday periods. To this end, the Department of Education and Youth should develop a *National Model for the roll out of Meals Outside of School Terms* in liaison with Education and Training Boards Ireland, who already have a similar model in ETBI schools. This National Model should be developed in collaboration and with a view to a phased national roll-out beginning in Summer 2027, prioritising schools identified as having the highest levels of concentrated disadvantage.

16. The *Education (Student and Parent) Charter Bill 2019* should be enacted expeditiously and fully implemented as a key priority of Government. The Committee recommends that the Bill should have a Whole School Food Culture Heading that legislates for the establishment of Student Food Councils comprising Student Food Ambassadors from First to Sixth Class, elected by peer students. Food Council Representatives would attend Board of Management meetings when appropriate.

CHAPTER 4: SUSTAINABILITY

The Committee heard evidence highlighting the importance of ensuring that the continued expansion of the School Meals Programme is supported by environmentally sustainable practices. Stakeholders raised concerns regarding food waste, packaging waste and the environmental impact of supply chains associated with meal provision. The Committee also heard evidence that the Programme presents opportunities to promote more sustainable food systems, including reduced waste, local sourcing and environmentally responsible procurement practices.

PACKAGING AND WASTE REDUCTION

The Committee received evidence highlighting concerns regarding both food waste and packaging waste associated with the delivery of the School Meals Programme.

In its submission to the Committee, ET emphasised the environmental implications of the current delivery model and stated that:

Food and packaging waste is another major issue. Limited flexibility in ordering systems or portion sizes have resulted in large volumes of waste, creating environmental concerns and additional costs for schools. This directly undermines sustainability and climate action objectives.¹⁰⁹

The National Parents Council (NPC) also raised concerns regarding food waste associated with the Programme. In its consultation with parents, the NPC reported concerns regarding unused meals and waste generated through inflexible ordering systems. Survey responses highlighted parental

¹⁰⁹ Educate Together, [Opening Statement](#), 14 January 2026, p. 2.

observations that meals are sometimes ordered but not consumed, contributing to avoidable food waste within schools.¹¹⁰

The Committee also heard evidence during its hearings regarding alternative serving arrangements that can reduce both packaging waste and food waste. In oral evidence to the Committee, Ms. Frances Kerry, Trustee to the NABMSE highlighted the benefits of reusable service ware, stating: “...when students are eating off plates, there is less waste. There is no packaging, the dishes are washed and ready for the next day and the students have had the communal experience, a social gathering.”¹¹¹

Evidence from stakeholders also emphasised the importance of promoting sustainable food practices within school meal provision. In oral evidence to the Committee, Dr. Darina Allen highlighted the opportunity presented by the Programme to promote more sustainable food practices and stated: “There is also the opportunity to educate children on food waste and not wasting food.”¹¹²

The Committee also received evidence highlighting the broader environmental implications of large-scale school meal provision. In its submission to the Committee, Food Policy Ireland cautioned that certain delivery models may contribute to long supply chains, food waste and environmental impacts, if sustainability considerations are not incorporated into programme design.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ The National Parents' Council, [Parents' and Children's Perspectives on the Hot School Meals Scheme Survey](#), 14 January 2026, pp. 22-198.

¹¹¹ The National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education, Joint Committee on Education and Youth – [Debate](#) 14 January 2026.

¹¹² Dr. Darina Allen, Joint Committee on Education and Youth: [Debate](#) – 22 January 2016.

¹¹³ Food Policy Ireland, [More than a Meal - How Ireland's School Meals can nourish children, economically empower local communities, and stimulate ecological agriculture - the triple-win](#), 05 February 2026, p. 1.

School meals providers also emphasised behavioural factors influencing food waste. The Lunch Bag indicated to the Committee that food waste in classrooms is often linked to factors such as limited eating time, children bringing additional lunches from home. And novelty effects whereby pupils repeatedly order the same meal and later report that they no longer enjoy it.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ The Lunch Bag, [Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth](#), February 2026, p. 5.

SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE AND LOCAL FOOD SUPPLY CHAINS

The Committee heard evidence that the School Meals Programme could be designed to better support sustainable food systems, including shorter supply chains and local or community-based provision, while maintaining its core nutritional objectives.

In opening statement on 22 January 2026, Dr. Darina Allen stated that school food should “...connect children to their local area, the seasons and Irish farmers and producers.”¹¹⁵

Dr. Allen further argued that the Programme should support “...national goals on health, sustainability, food waste, green procurement, rural economies and short supply chains.”¹¹⁶

Dr. Allen also pointed to an existing Irish example of local or community-based provision, stating:

*The Duhallow Community Food initiative in North Cork prepares 2,472 meals each morning for 29 primary schools. There is no reheating of pre-packed ultra-processed food – just simple, whole ingredients sourced from local butchers and greengrocers, cooked by people from the community...*¹¹⁷

The Committee also heard concerns that the current delivery model risks embedding longer supply chains and more industrialised provision. In its submission to the Committee, Food Policy Ireland stated that:

The rapid roll-out and the model of delivery has had unforeseen negative impacts, favouring large-scale, for-profit industrialised food

¹¹⁵ Dr. Darina Allen, [Opening Statement](#), 22 January 2026, p. 2.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 4.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 6.

*production approaches with the negative consequences that they encompass: poor nutrition, long food supply chains, waste and low-paid jobs. We risk locking in this approach to school food.*¹¹⁸

Food Policy Ireland proposed an alternative approach, stating that it “...proposes a community-based approach to school food provision to be developed via (i) place-based piloting, (ii) capacity-building (iii) re-design of school food policy and procurement guidance to build in community approaches.”¹¹⁹

This theme also arose in oral evidence regarding how procurement models can support local outcomes while maintaining national coordination. During the Committee’s meeting on 14 January 2026, Dr. Emer Nowlan, CEO, ET stated:

*Centralised procurement does not need to mean one supplier for the whole country; far from it. We have already talked about the local benefits. Where food can be cooked on premises, you reduce waste and develop those relationships between your catering staff and the children...*¹²⁰

In the same exchange, Dr. Nowlan referenced stakeholder feedback describing long-distance delivery models, stating: “One of our principal’s responses painted a picture of lorries of aeroplane food being driven back and forward across the country. We need to reduce that.”¹²¹

Evidence from meal providers also emphasised the role that the School Meals Programme can play in supporting domestic supply chains. Glanmore Foods

¹¹⁸ Food Policy Ireland, [More than a Meal - How Ireland’s School Meals can nourish children, economically empower local communities, and stimulate ecological agriculture - the triple-win](#), 05 February 2026, p. 1.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹²⁰ Educate Together, Joint Committee on Education and Youth: [Debate](#) – 14 January 2026.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

indicated to the Committee that approximately 94% of its total food spend is currently directed towards Irish producers, manufacturers and wholesalers.¹²²

RECOMMENDATIONS: SUSTAINABILITY

17. All Suppliers should be mandated to provide reusable plates, knives, forks and drinking glasses/cups so that students eat their meals off a plate with a knife and fork. Where food is prepared in house, funding should be made available for the purchase of eating utensils, and, ideally, a space for students to rinse their own cutlery before it is put in a dishwasher. In addition, a dedicated capital grant scheme should be established to fund the installation of commercial dishwashers.
18. The Inter Departmental Working Group on School Meals Programme should publish a policy paper on *the Future Viability of Community Hubs* in the context of the expansion of the School Meals Programme.
19. Local Producers should be strongly supported by the School Meals Programme, insofar as is practicable, with priority given to organic produce. To this end, procurement guidance should be amended to explicitly allow for the use of 'place of origin' as a weighted award criterion, not just a pass/fail requirement, and to permit contract splitting to enable smaller, local producers to participate without being required to service an entire region.

¹²² Glanmore Foods, [Glanmore Food's Written Submission as part of the Committee's Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme](#), February 2026, p. 2.

CHAPTER 5: GOVERNANCE AND COORDINATION

As the Programme has expanded significantly in recent years, stakeholders highlighted to the Committee the importance of ensuring that governance structures, oversight mechanisms and programme evaluation processes remain appropriate to its scale and integration within the education system.

INDEPENDENT EVALUATION

The Committee received evidence highlighting the importance of evaluating the impacts of the School Meals Programme as it continues to expand across the school system.

On 20 November 2025, the IWGSMP outlined ongoing work to review aspects of the Programme. Mr. Simon Shevlin, Principal Officer and Chairperson of the IWGSMP, stated that further research was planned to examine the Programme's impacts, noting:

Independent research was carried out in 2020 and 2023 regarding the school meals programme. There was quite positive feedback. However, we will carry out more research next year. There is an organisation called the School Meals Coalition under the World Health Organization. The Minister for Health signed us up to it this year. That was based on a recommendation from the previous joint committee on social protection. It will do research for us in relation to how our scheme is run here and a longitudinal study regarding how this benefits kids in the long term.¹²³

The Committee also received written evidence highlighting gaps in the existing evidence base relating to the Programme.

¹²³ The Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme, Joint Committee on Education and Youth – [Debate](#): 20 November 2025.

In its submission to the Committee, the JMB emphasised that while the Programme has expanded significantly, there remains limited published evidence examining its impacts at post-primary level. The submission noted that: *“There is limited published evaluation evidence relating specifically to post-primary schools.”*¹²⁴

The JMB further stated that: *“This gap in evidence underscores the value of a dedicated, independent evaluation... particularly at post-primary level.”*¹²⁵

Evidence submitted to the Committee by the Children’s Rights Alliance also highlighted the need to strengthen the evidence base relating to the Programme’s outcomes. In its submission, the organisation noted that there is: *“...limited comprehensive data or research on the quality of hot school meals, with many of the issues to date being raised through the media.”*¹²⁶

¹²⁴ The Joint Managerial Body, [Written Submission by the Joint Managerial Body \(JMB\) to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education on the School Meals Programme at Post-Primary Level](#), January 2026, p. 3.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 3.

¹²⁶ Children’s Rights Alliance, [Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth: Evaluation of the Impacts of the School Meals Programme](#), 09 January 2026, pp. 3-4.

RECOMMENDATIONS: GOVERNANCE AND COORDINATION

20. The Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme should conduct a Value for Money (VFM) National Audit on the School Meals Programme as an urgent priority for publication by the end of Q3 2026. The National Audit should include, *inter alia*: nutritional standards; food provenance; method of delivery; and parent, teacher and student feedback.

21. The Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme should commission an independent research study covering three areas:

- Nutrition,
- Mode of Delivery (Onsite versus Procurement), and
- Qualitative Research (Social and Wider aspects with specific reference to School Attendance).

This research study should be completed by the end of Q1 2027. Its findings should be integral to the roll out of the Programme in Post Primary Schools.

CHAPTER 6: INTERNATIONAL EVIDENCE AND BEST PRACTICE

The Committee considered international evidence on school meals provision in order to inform its assessment of the School Meals Programme in Ireland. Evidence gathered during the Committee’s study visit to Finland, together with wider international experience, highlighted how school meal programmes can be integrated within education systems to support children’s nutrition, wellbeing and participation in school life.

LEARNINGS FROM INTERNATIONAL EVIDENCE AND BEST PRACTICE

The Committee considered international evidence regarding school meals provision, including insights gathered during its study visit to Finland in January 2026, during which the Committee’s delegation examined aspects of the Finnish education system and school food provision.

During the visit, the Committee heard that school meals have long been an established component of the Finnish education system, forming part of a broader model of universal supports provided to pupils. Officials explained that school meals have been a cornerstone of the school day in Finnish schools since 1948, and that food education is embedded within the national curriculum.¹²⁷

The Committee observed this approach directly during visits to Finnish schools. At Viikki Teacher Training School in Helsinki, the delegation participated in a school lunch with students and observed that meals are prepared and cooked on-site and provided in a communal dining environment, where pupils sit together and eat balanced meals as part of the school day. The Committee further heard that meals are organised in

¹²⁷ The Joint Committee on Education and Youth, [Travel Report on a Study Visit to examine the Primary and Post Primary Education System and Youth Work in Finland](#), February 2026, p. 10.

staggered sittings to ensure that students have sufficient time to sit with their peers in a canteen setting and eat a nutritious meal.¹²⁸

The Finnish model also demonstrates the integration of school meals within wider educational policy. The Committee heard that universal supports, including school meals, school transport and school materials, form part of a broader approach aimed at promoting equality of access to education.¹²⁹

RECOMMENDATIONS: INTERNATIONAL EVIDENCE AND BEST PRACTICE

22. Onsite provision of School Meals, prepared from scratch and eaten in a communal setting, should be the preferred option as the Programme expands. Advice should be sought from the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment regarding local employment arrangements, in terms of employing catering staff directly to cook and serve the meals with student support, as appropriate.
23. Consideration should be given to providing self-service meals where possible using appropriate catering equipment. This would minimise the workload for catering staff and maximise student independence and encourage a sense of personal responsibility. It would also minimise waste.
24. The Department of Education and Youth should, in consultation, develop design guidelines for new and refurbished school canteens that prioritise self-service meals.

¹²⁸ The Joint Committee on Education and Youth, [Travel Report on a Study Visit to examine the Primary and Post Primary Education System and Youth Work in Finland](#), February 2026, p. 11.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 20.

APPENDIX 1: LIST OF SUBMISSIONS

Written submissions were received from the following organisations and individuals.

All submissions are available [here](#).

- An Foras Pátrúnachta
- Apridata
- Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI)
- Children’s Rights Alliance (CRA)
- Food Policy Ireland
- Food Village
- General Synod Board of Education (Republic of Ireland) Of the Church of Ireland
- Glanmore Foods
- Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO)
- Joint Managerial Body (JMB)
- Ms Muriel Weekes, Principal, St. Joseph’s Primary School for Visually Impaired Students, Dublin 9
- Ms Sharon Graham, Parent
- Muslim Primary Education Board (MPEB)
- Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre
- St. Ultan’s Primary School
- Teachers’ Union of Ireland (TUI)
- The Department of Social Protection
- The Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme
- The Lunch Bag
- The National Dairy Council

- The National Parents Council
- The Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO)
- Tusla Child and Family Agency

APPENDIX 2: ENGAGEMENT WITH STAKEHOLDERS

On 20 November 2025, the Committee held a roundtable discussion with members of the Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme: Mr. Simon Shevlin, Principal Officer, Department of Social Protection, and Chairperson, Ms Siobhan Gaffey, Head of Shared Services Implementation Unit and Procurement, Department of Education and Youth, Mr. David Skene, Chartered Engineer, Programme Manager, Planning and Development Unit, Department of Education and Youth, Ms Fiona Ward, Policy Advisor on Obesity and Nutrition, CORU-registered Dietician, Department of Health, and Mr. Rob Phillips, Chief Specialist, Environmental Health, Food Safety Authority of Ireland.

The debate can be accessed [here](#).

On 14 January 2026, the Committee held a roundtable discussion with Ms Deirdre Matthews, General Secretary of the Joint Managerial Body, Mr. Paul Thornton, Assistant General Secretary of the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools, Mr. Seamus Mulconry, General Secretary of the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association, Mr. Mark McDonald, Director of Schools at the Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board, representing Education and Training Boards Ireland, Mr. Paul Crone, Director of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, Ms Frances Kerry, Trustee of the National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education, and Dr. Emer Nowlan, Chief Executive Officer of Educate Together.

The debate can be accessed [here](#).

On 22 January 2026, the Committee held a roundtable discussion with Dr. Naomi Feely, Policy Director, Children's Rights Alliance; Ms Áine Lynch, Chief

Executive Officer, National Parents Council; Ms Louise Bayliss, Head of Social Justice and Policy, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Mr. Denis Carrigan, Public Relations Officer, Association of Teachers of Home Economics, Dr. Darina Allen, Cook and Author, Ballymaloe Cookery School, and Mr. Stephen Moffatt, National Policy Manager, Barnardos Ireland.

The debate can be accessed [here](#).

On 28 January 2026, the Committee held a roundtable discussion with Dr. Maria O'Sullivan, Associate Professor in Human Nutrition, Clinical Medicine, Trinity College Dublin, Mr. Conor McCarthy, Principal, Tallaght Community National School, Mr. Eoghan O'Byrne, Principal, St. Mary's National School, Limerick City, and Ms Áine O'Leary, Student, St. Mary's Secondary School, Macroom, County Cork.

The debate can be accessed [here](#).

APPENDIX 3: NATIONAL PROCUREMENT TEMPLATE AND ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION

A copy of the Call for Tenders document relating to the School Meals Programme, as well as an accompanying contextual note, provided to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth by the Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme, can be accessed [here](#).