

Written submission by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection regarding the School Meals Programme to the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs on the topic 'Tackling Childhood Obesity'

There are currently two separate schemes within the school meals programme, the Urban School Meals Scheme and the School Meals (Local Projects) Scheme.

1. The Urban School Meals Scheme

The Urban School Meals Scheme is a statutory scheme that is operated in conjunction with Local Authorities. The Urban Scheme is confined to national school children and the decision on eligibility of individual children and schools rests with the Local Authorities, subject to this Department's endorsement. The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection jointly funds the food costs on a 50/50 basis with the Local Authorities who are responsible for the administration and operation of the scheme. Over 300 schools benefit from the Urban School Meal's Scheme, at an annual cost to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection of approximately €1m.

2. School Meals Local Projects Scheme

The School Meals (Local Projects) Scheme provides funding directly to primary schools, secondary schools, local groups and voluntary organisations, in both urban and rural areas, which operate their own school meals projects. The scheme was established to assist school meals projects operating outside the remit of the Urban School Meals scheme.

The school meals programme provides funding towards the provision of food to some 1,580 schools and organisations benefitting some 250,000 children at a total cost of some €54 million in 2018. Funding is based on a rate of payment per meal, per child, per day. Examples of the types of food to be provided are in the attached Table at Appendix 1.

The objective of the scheme is to provide regular, nutritious food to children who are unable, due to lack of good quality food, to take full advantage of the education provided to them. Applicants to the scheme are directed to the Department's website which clearly advises that funding is for healthy nutritious food only and examples of food items are provided. Access

to healthy eating documents and guidelines are available on the school meals site including a link to the most recently launched '*Healthy Food for Life – the Healthy Eating Guidelines and Food Pyramid*' by the Department of Health. '*Nutrition Standards for School Meals*' published in September 2017 under the auspices of Healthy Ireland, will be a valuable resource to enable and promote healthy eating and healthy lifestyles in schools. These standards will complement and strengthen the support and controls already in place.

3. Nutrition Standards for School Meals

The increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity in Irish children is a major public health issue and while there is some evidence of a levelling off of obesity and overweight in 7 year olds, these results are not replicated in disadvantaged or DEIS schools. Overweight and obesity can have multiple negative consequences for physical and emotional health both acutely and in the long term while also impeding social wellbeing. As children from low income households are more vulnerable to inadequate nutrition, the DEIS school setting is a primary target for these Nutrition Standards.

The publication of these Standards delivers on key commitments of 4 Government Departments: the Department of Health, the Department of Social Protection, the Department of Education and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. In particular, it delivers on the purpose of the national policy framework for children and young people '*Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*' to coordinate policy across Government to achieve better outcomes for children, as well as reflecting the cross-sectoral action required to tackle child poverty. A Working Group, led by the Health and Wellbeing Programme in the Department of Health, (with DEASP representation) developed these Standards and included contributions from safe food and the Healthy Eating and Active Living Programme in the Health Service Executive. The Standards have been adapted from standards to support the Food in Schools Policy in Northern Ireland.

The standards are referenced in the Service Level Agreement between the schools and DEASP. The standards should also be adhered to when food contracts are being specified in the procurement process and should be applied when planning menus.

4. Standards that apply to all meals and snacks

- Jam, marmalade and honey, which have a high sugar content, should not be offered as a breakfast option
- Low fat spreads to be used for sandwiches or toast.
- Sugar, including honey and brown sugar, must not be available to add to cereals or porridge.
- Confectionery, such as crisps, chocolate, cakes and biscuits, must not be served and will not be funded. Fried and other high fat food products, such as chips, roast potatoes, fried potatoes, products fried in the manufacturing process, garlic bread, fried fish or meal choices containing pastry, should only be served a maximum of one day per week.
- Processed meat or chicken products (such as burgers, sausages, chicken nuggets etc.) should only be served a maximum of once a week.
- Processed meat and chicken products are manufactured products that have been processed and are ready for cooking or reheating.
- On days where processed meat or chicken products are served, schools should aim to provide 50% of the meal offering as a healthy option to allow a choice for pupils.
- Limiting fried and other high fat options helps to limit the overall fat content of lunches.
- Table salt must not be available to add to food.
- A small amount of low fat spread can be used on bread (for sandwiches and toast).
- Low fat mayonnaise should be limited to 10g or one teaspoon.
- Funding must not be spent on sugar-sweetened drinks or juices. Milk and water are the best drinks to serve; fruit juice (unsweetened) should not be served more than once per day.
- Children and young people in school should have easy access to free, fresh drinking water at all times.

5. Monitoring of Standards

Schools and organisations must reapply for funding in advance of each school year and are required to submit detailed records at the end of each school year. Expenditure on unhealthy food items is deducted from the following year's funding allocation. The requirement to implement these nutrition standards is therefore largely met by that Department only funding healthy foods provided by schools under the school meals programme.

In addition, the Department initiated an on-site inspection programme in 2012 in participating schools to ensure that the scheme rules are being adhered to. The inspection process is being rolled out across all schools and includes an assessment of the type of food provided. All schools participating in the School Meals Scheme are expected to comply with the standards from September 2018. Compliance with the new standards will form part of the inspection process from the 2018/2019 academic year.

The operation of school meals projects is the responsibility of the school or group including the delivery model and choice of supplier to be used. The scheme can be delivered in a variety of ways and depends on the needs, capabilities and resources, including infrastructure, of the schools or groups. Delivery models can range from the provision of full canteen services to the purchase of pre-prepared meals from specialist school meals suppliers or local suppliers which ensures that the supports available under the scheme can be provided across all schools.

6. Obesity Policy Implementation Oversight Group (OPIOG)

This group has been established to oversee implementation of the Obesity Policy which is a priority under the Healthy Ireland agenda. DEASP is represented on this group and three meetings of the group have been held to date. The group is chaired by Department of Health. The terms of reference of the group are as follows:

- Provide oversight and strategic leadership to the implementation of the Obesity Policy and Action Plan (OPAP) within the Healthy Ireland Framework.

- Promote, develop and support action on OPAP across all relevant Government Departments, agencies and sectors, and identify processes for engaging with networks of stakeholders.
- Agree a structured Work Programme to ensure effective delivery and monitoring of the actions set out in the Plan.
- Meet at intervals to be determined by the Implementation Group Chair.
- Provide for reporting on progress as appropriate, including through established Healthy Ireland reporting arrangements.
- Establish as appropriate thematic working Groups of the OPAP Implementation Group for the purposes of progress in the implementation of the OPAP in identified/specific thematic areas. (Members of the subgroups need not necessarily be members of the Implementation Group. The diversity of the OPAP may therefore require individuals, experts and representatives from other organisations to be invited to join such subgroups as required.)

7. OPIOG Healthy Eating Sub-group

A sub-group of the OPIOG on healthy eating has been set up and DEASP is also represented on this group. Two meetings have been held so far. The terms of reference of the group are as follows;

- To develop an annual programme of work in line with Obesity Policy and Action Plan priorities.
- To agree a programme of work for 2018 and discuss work packages for Sub-group members.
- To deliver on the actions identified in the programme of work as indicated by the Obesity Policy and Action Plan (short, medium and long-term).

- To promote cross-sectoral action to support and progress nutrition in settings – home, childcare settings, schools and colleges, youth sector, community, workplace and the health service.

Appendix 1 - School Meals Food Clubs

Meal	Max Rate of Payment (per child per day)	Minimum number of food items	Examples of Food to be Provided
Breakfast/Snack	€0.60	2 items	1 serving of wholemeal/wholegrain cereal or bread PLUS 1 serving of fruit OR 1 serving of milk, yogurt or cheese
Lunch	€1.40	1 substantial item + 1 small item + a drink	Wholemeal/wholegrain sandwich or roll containing 1 serving meat, poultry, egg or cheese and 1 serving salad PLUS 1 serving fruit PLUS a drink (e.g. water, milk, unsweetened juice)
Dinner	€1.90	Hot meal + drink	1 serving meat, poultry, egg, beans PLUS 1 serving potatoes, pasta or rice PLUS 2 servings vegetables/fruit PLUS a drink (Milk, Water, Unsweetened Juice)