

The ‘Good Food’ Case for the provision of Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) in Scotland

Discussion Paper

I. Introduction

The Scottish Government has committed to the introduction of Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) for primary school children as of 2022 and renewed its commitment to the ‘Good Food Nation Bill’, setting the nation on a course towards a reality of universal access to high quality, nutritious and sustainably sourced [‘Good Food’](#) which is better for Scotland’s people, animals, and the planet.

School meals are more than food on a plate: Primarily, they provide access to a daily healthy and nutritious meal to Scotland’s children and young people, supporting their well-being and fuelling their learning. They also play an integral part in food education and culture, fostering healthy and sustainable food behaviours and a positive relationship with food and its wider social, economic, and environmental significance. School food procurement is a powerful tool to shape sustainable supply chains for the benefit of local businesses and communities as well as the environment.

The introduction of UFSM represents a key step on Scotland’s journey of becoming a ‘Good Food Nation’: Universal provision of healthy, nutritious, and sustainable meals for all primary school children is a critical step in realising the Right to Food in Scotland and ensures public food reflects public values. UFSM presents a tremendous opportunity for delivering multiple policy objectives to benefit public health, child poverty reduction, community wealth building, environmental sustainability, and climate change mitigation.

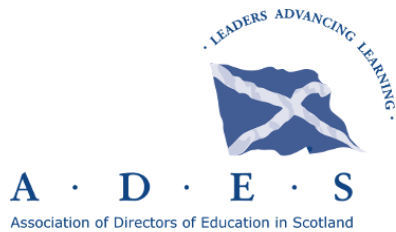
Therefore, school meals are an ‘investment’ not a ‘cost’. The roll-out of UFSM will undoubtedly present logistical and financial challenges at a time when public budgets are under significant pressure. Investing in getting school food ‘right’, however, and resourcing school meals adequately to support schools, caterers, teachers, children, and communities to provide ‘Good Food’ - noting that this might not be the cheapest option - will be of utmost importance for the success of UFSM and will see children and their communities reap the rewards.

Investing in ‘Good Food’ provision in schools is an investment in Scotland’s priorities across public health, the economy, and the environment. At a time when COVID-19 has left families and communities facing difficult choices and financial challenges, school meals have been put into sharper focus: School meals not only support parents with the provision of nutritionally balanced sustenance for their children, but also foster local jobs along the supply chains and community wealth building on the path towards a green recovery from COVID-19.

The Scottish Government and local authorities have set strong foundations for providing universal, good quality and sustainably sourced school food. UFSM is a unique opportunity to build on these foundations and allow the public food sector to lead the way towards realising the access to ‘Good Food’ with meals served setting the tone for Scotland’s relationship with producers and providers as a ‘Good Food Nation’ and constituting an example at a time when interest in school food quality and sustainability is high on the agenda.

In recognition of the tremendous opportunities presented by the provision of UFSM for delivering the benefits of ‘Good Food’ across Scotland a Working Group from across the school food sector has convened to outline key opportunities and recommendations for harnessing maximum benefits for Scottish children and young people, their communities, and the environment. A summary of the first discussions is presented below. Regular discussions of the Working Group will continue this dialogue, share learning and identify opportunities for future collaboration.

The Working Group is comprised of representatives from ADES Resources Network, APSE, Argyll & Bute Council, ASSIST FM, Brakes Scotland, COSLA, East Ayrshire Council, Edinburgh City Council, North Ayrshire Council, Nourish Scotland, Scotland Excel, South Lanarkshire Council, The Food Foundation, The Soil Association Scotland, The University of Edinburgh Business School and Zero Waste Scotland.



Resources Network



II. Key messages & Recommendations

These key recommendations will require to be delivered by a number of stakeholders, including local and national government.

1. UFSM provides the opportunity to shape **school food supply chains which benefit local businesses and communities as much as the environment**. An investment in local procurement and sustainably produced ingredients is an investment in community wealth building and the transition towards environmentally sustainable production systems.

Recommendation: Prioritise local procurement of ethical and sustainably produced school food ingredients.

- Invest in a collaborative network of locally based intermediaries who are tasked with identifying bureaucratically light routes to market for local suppliers and supporting them to participate in school food procurement.
- Review procurement legislation to mandate more local procurement.
- Facilitate skills training and know-how for local suppliers to get 'tender ready'.
- Ensure that food and drink manufacturing infrastructure is aligned to the needs of school food procurement, making best use of the Public Sector Food Forum to highlight opportunities for improved investment.

2. Harnessing the multiple opportunities presented by the introduction of UFSM requires the adoption of a **'whole school approach' to food** with a focus on consistent provision of fresh, healthy, and nutritious meals, valorisation of the catering profession, investment in catering infrastructure and dining environment, a focus on food waste reduction, and links with the wider community.

Recommendation: Adopt a 'whole school approach' to the provision of UFSM.

- Review [*Better Eating, Better Learning*](#) with a view for this to be mandated across Scotland to provide the framework for 'Good Food' provision in schools.
- Ensure consistent provision of healthy, nutritious, and sustainable meals supported by the 'whole school approach' to food as outlined in *Better Eating, Better Learning*
- Support teachers and school managers in delivery food education which ties in with the 'Good Food' approach to schools.
- Raise the profile of the catering profession by developing career paths and opportunities for professional development, valuing catering staff for the important role they play
- Invest in catering infrastructure & dining environment and recognise the requirement for capital funding to deliver the UFSM expansion programme
- Focus on food waste reduction through pupil education and ownership, investment in meal quality and dining infrastructure, and facilitate further research.
- Create links between schools and communities by treating school kitchens and canteens as community 'food hubs' and ensure that community benefits are used for the school food experience.

3. The **investment in ‘Good Food’ provision** school meals will see children, families and communities reap the benefits across sectors in form of public health improvement, community wealth building and job creation, as well as environmental protection.

Recommendations:

- “Fair funding”, i.e. multi-year settlements which account for inflationary and wider policy pressures.
- Investing in school food provision to ensure that budget pressures do not compromise the multiple opportunities offered by UFSM.
- Ensure that funding for school food is spent on the delivery of school food, protecting the quality of the meal that reaches our children and young people.

4. **Placing the voice of children and families front and centre** not only serves the [Rights of the Child](#) but is crucial to the uptake and success of UFSM and its multiple benefits for society, including delivery of the Right to Food.

Recommendation:

- Facilitate the co-production of all matters concerning the roll-out of UFSM with children and their families.

5. The provision of UFSM is shaped by systems and actors with different interests and objectives including local and national government, food and drink organisations and suppliers. The focus on ‘Good Food’ in the provision of UFSM is an opportunity to deepen **collaboration between stakeholders in the school food system** and across sectors and ensure that children and families are involved in shaping the process.

Recommendations:

- Ensuring wide stakeholder representation of all actors across the school food system in the FSM Programme Operation Group to drive the ‘Good Food’ case
- Develop a national recipe book of school meals that encourages the use of regional and seasonal produce
- Actively promote uptake of those national recipes among local authorities and more widely across the public sector

6. Developing **universal standards and methods for measuring impact** is crucial for ensuring the universal delivery of high quality and sustainable meals across Scotland.

Recommendations:

- Adopt a clear and measurable standard for good school food by revising and mandating *Better Eating, Better Learning*.
- Encourage local authorities to adopt the Soil Association’s Food For Life Served Here (FFLSH) standard as an existing framework which can be utilised to achieve and measure ‘Good Food’ standards.
- Draw on existing tools and methods to include indicators for the economic and environmental sustainability of school food, e.g. local economic impact and carbon footprint.
- Develop school food service standards around dining room design and environment, supervision, and all aspects of children's dining experience to complement nutritional requirements. Invest in research to measure their impact.

III. The 'Good Food' case for UFSM

1. Sustainable procurement – prioritising local, ethical and sustainable ingredients

Public organisations have the purchasing power to drive transformation and demand for good, nutritious food. Sustainable procurement of school food ingredients provides tremendous opportunities for developing supply chains that support local businesses and communities, reduce the environmental footprint and climate change impact of Scotland's public food procurement, and foster pride and appreciation of Scottish food.

The Scottish Government and local authorities have laid the foundations for a focus on procurement which prioritises local suppliers and considers social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability with [Catering for Change](#). Locally sourced produce has become an increasing priority for councils and public sector food contracts have become more accessible to Scottish businesses in recent years. Over the past five years, spending by councils on Scottish products through Scotland Excel contracts has increased from £8.8m to £15.8m, and now accounts for more than 36% of all spend through Scotland Excel. This has helped to support Scottish businesses and to reduce the food miles associated with the Scottish public food service.

UFSM provides the opportunity to shape supply chains which support maximum benefit for local producers, communities, and the environment through localisation of supply chains and specification of ethical and sustainable food ingredients. An investment in local and environmentally sustainable supply chains means investment in the local economy, community wealth building, and transition to environmentally sustainable production systems.

1.1. Prioritising local food procurement

Ingredients for school meals should as much as possible be sourced locally, ensuring that the balance in procurement from small local businesses and national supply frameworks results in maximum benefit for local authority regions. Procuring ingredients from local or regional businesses, organisations or networks supports their access to stable market demand, reduces food miles through coordinated distribution, and maximises spend in local communities. School food procurement from local supply chains can foster local jobs in production, processing, logistics and wholesaling, all of which contribute to a multiplier effect where every £1 spent generates additional value for the local economy.

Incentivising a restructuring of school food supply chains towards prioritising local businesses requires smaller, local suppliers to be supported in their ability to access routes to market and participate in school food procurement. Providing training and know-how to complete tenders and bid for public contracts is fundamental for their participation. At the same time, Brexit has provided the Scottish Government with the opportunity to update procurement legislation to make it easier to specify local produce within tenders, for instance by stipulating minimum requirements for percentage of locally sourced food in school food procurement contracts. Steps should also be taken to improve origin information, ensuring that the original source of commodities is clearly identifiable and local authorities are clearly able to determine if produce is Scottish.

Localising procurement should also go hand in hand with investment in Scottish food manufacturing in areas where Scottish provision could be significantly increased, for instance in organic production, market gardening, controlled environment glasshouses.

1.2. Prioritising ethical and sustainable ingredients

Sourcing ethical and sustainable school food ingredients supports the transition towards more environmentally sustainable food production systems and allows the use of public money to contribute to the mitigation of climate change and biodiversity loss. A longer-term ambition to increase the percentage of organic school food in school food procurement will incentivise local producers to invest in a transition towards environmentally-friendly farming and food growing methods. In Denmark, for instance, mandating a minimum requirement of organic ingredients to be used in public kitchens has acted as policy driver to encourage more environmentally-friendly food production systems and changed the culture of public food service.

2. Refreshing the importance of the school food experience with a ‘whole school approach’

Healthy and nutritious school meals are vital for children’s development, well-being and learning. The school food experience shapes children’s relationship with food, tastes and food behaviours from the very start of a child’s educational experience in Early Years through Primary, Secondary to further education settings into adulthood. Whether the experience of eating healthy and nutritious meals, the enjoyment of eating together with peers, or the challenge of trying new dishes – and the dining hall is a classroom in itself and all aspects of the school food experience contribute to children’s learning about health, nutrition and sustainability. In fulfilling their health promoting duties, schools should ensure that support for children and young people’s mental and physical health be considered holistically post-pandemic.

The Scottish Government and local authorities recognise the strong educational aspect of school food provision. Existing policy frameworks, and in particular *Better Eating, Better Learning*, provides not only the foundation for the provision of [healthy and nutritious food in schools](#), but also encourages school food provision as a vehicle for health and sustainability education .

UFSM provides an opportunity to build on this commitment and refresh the importance of the school food experience to promote healthy and sustainable food behaviours and inspire a transformation of food culture in Scottish schools and beyond. Harnessing this opportunity requires a ‘whole school approach’ which considers the quality and tastefulness of the meals served, the skills and knowledge of catering staff, the dining environment, food waste reduction and links to the wider community. The *Better Eating, Better Learning* guidance provides an existing framework which - if mandated - could drive the transition towards ‘Good Food’ in schools across Scotland.

2.1. Consistent provision of ‘Good Food’

In order for UFSM to reflect and reinforce what is taught in the classroom, consistent provision of healthy, nutritious and sustainably sourced meals is paramount. Cooking meals from scratch using fresh and minimally processed ingredients ensures that meals are nutritious, fresh and healthy. The more attractive and tastier the menu options are, the more children will take up the option.

Valuing school food as an integral part of the school day and celebrating the good quality of food served in schools supports children and young people in their learning about the importance of a healthy and nutritious meal and lets them connect with their food, the way it is made, and where it comes from with benefits for child nutrition as much as food waste reduction.

2.2. Raising the profile of the catering profession

Catering staff play a core role in the provision of freshly prepared, healthy, and nutritious school meals. Their skills, knowledge, and commitment to putting good quality meals on pupils’ plates is key for school meal quality, attractiveness and uptake, food waste reduction, and the promotion of a positive school food culture.

Investing in catering skills, knowledge and sharing of good practice among catering staff is not only crucial for school meal success but values their important contribution to school food and raises the profile and status of the catering profession. Developing clear career paths and opportunities for professional development ensures that catering professionals are inspired, engaged, and valued and makes the public food service an attractive job prospect for young people.

2.3. Supporting teachers and school management

Implementing a 'whole school approach' to food provision which integrates learning in the classroom with learning in the dining hall and other settings requires teachers and the school management to be supported with resources, skills and guidance for delivering this approach.

Food education is already firmly rooted in Scotland's [Curriculum for Excellence](#) and [Education Scotland](#) provides a wealth of resources for food education in the classroom. The [Royal Highland Education Trust](#) facilitates experiential learning beyond the school campus through farm visits, cookery sessions and events. Ensuring that this existing commitment and solid foundations for food education ties in with the 'Good Food' approach to school meals will provide a powerful tool for the transformation of food culture in schools and beyond.

2.4. Investment in catering infrastructure & dining environment

The eating environment where meals are served, including the infrastructure, time dedicated to the school lunch and ambience of the environment, impact school meal uptake, consumption, and food waste. UFSM will undoubtedly pose logistical challenges regarding the adaptation of the catering facilities and canteens to the increase in meal production and uptake. Therefore, the focus on school meal quality and nutritional value has to be combined with adequate resourcing of on-site catering and dining infrastructure that is built to accommodate whole school rolls and provide comfortable and inviting eating environments around the school campus. An attractive school food experience will result in uptake and make healthy and nutritious school meals the appealing choice for students. To deliver this, the allocation of capital funding is essential to ensure that existing facilities are upgraded to provide suitable cooking and eating environments.

2.5. Focus on food waste reduction

The waste of food and drink in schools leads to significant nutritional value being lost. Plate waste is currently the main driver for food waste in schools and weak feedback loops often mean that service providers have little or no visibility of the volume or what is driving plate waste.

A 'Good Food' approach to UFSM presents an opportunity to ensure that food waste prevention becomes the societal norm for the next generation. Several pathways can lead to a reduction in school food waste: Active engagement and learning about food provenance and sustainability supports children and young people to develop appreciation of 'Good Food'. Working with catering staff, teachers, and children to co-create menus can instil a sense of pride and ownership of the food served. Ensuring that food is served in a manner which owes to its quality and value (i.e. adequate plate-size, avoid spillages) and that students have sufficient time to eat can have positive impacts on food waste reduction. Pre-ordering of menus can be effective in reducing operational (kitchen and counter) waste in certain contexts.

Investment is needed for further research into the drivers and solutions for food waste to better understand which variables and behaviours are contributing to plate waste in schools.

2.6. Creating links with the wider community

School canteens have the potential to benefit not only children and young people but their families and communities too. School meals reduce the burden on parents by offering an easy, nutritionally balanced and convenient alternative to home-packed lunches, freeing up much needed time (and resources) for other work or family-related duties. This promotes a culture around school food whereby a school meal is the automatic choice for most children and young people.

As recommended by the Social Renewal Advisory Board's report [‘If Not Now, When?’](#) treating school kitchens and canteen facilities as community assets and resourcing them as ‘community food hubs’ with wider socio-economic benefits. There already exist strong examples of community food partnership work with the third sector, and it is important to note the role the voluntary sector played during the pandemic. There is an opportunity to build upon this work to deliver improved community food opportunities based on that experience to make use of school buildings and grounds in ways that are appropriate for each school's community setting.

Schools and school canteens can benefit from community benefits targeted at the education of children and young people, for instance by supporting school allotments or educational visits to farms and food producers. All of Scotland Excel frameworks include a requirement around community benefits. Local authorities should ensure that these are used to maximise the benefits of the ‘whole school approach’.

3. School meals are an ‘investment’, not a ‘cost’

School meals can deliver many benefits across public health, environmental and socio-economic sustainability and climate change mitigation. School meals are therefore an investment, not a cost. They must be financed adequately in order to deliver on their overall potential. There is a risk that the expanding provision will put greater pressure on already strained budgets and compromise the multiple benefits that universal school meal provision could offer.

While there is clear recognition that additional funding on its own will not fully address what is needed within the system, the need for fair and sustainable funding to Local Government cannot be ignored. At the moment much of the national progress around food in schools, particularly free school meal provision, is centrally directed by national policy, such as the recent SNP manifesto and 100-Day commitments. Furthermore, an amount of local authority spend is ring-fenced to the detriment of unprotected budgets, which means that catering departments are vulnerable to service and budget cuts.

The ‘Good Food’ approach to UFSM calls for investment in school meals: “Fair funding”, i.e. multi-year settlements which account for inflationary and wider policy pressures would empower local authorities to take long-term and visionary policy decisions around school food. This will ensure that budget pressures do not compromise the multiple opportunities offered by UFSM.

4. Placing the voice of children and families front and centre

Children - and by extension their families - are the primary beneficiaries of UFSM. Their health, wellbeing and learning is affected by the implementation of the school meal service, the quality of the food served and the wider links of the school food service with their community. The [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) imparts on each child ‘who is capable of forming their own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child’ (Article 12).

Children not only have the fundamental right to shape the school meal experience, but their decision to opt for a school meal and consume it is fundamental to the success and wider societal benefits of UFSM. Involving children and families in all matters concerning school food and giving them a suitable degree of ownership through well-designed involvement in co-producing menu development, procurement policies, food waste reduction policies, eating environments and ground rules of the school food experience not only facilitates life-long learning and a shift in school food culture but also promotes uptake of UFSM and thereby the Scottish Government's delivery on the Right to Food.

Building on recent developments and successes to engage better with parents, a 'Good Food' approach to UFSM will see children and their families at the centre of shaping the implementation of the programme.

The value of UFSM and school food in helping to create an equitable provision for all children and young people and as a means of tackling the consequences of child poverty should be clearly recognised and included in local child poverty action plans.

5. Facilitating collaboration between stakeholders and across sectors

School food provision is shaped by a plethora of overlapping systems and a variety of actors, not all of whom share interests and objectives or are equitably resourced across all local authorities. Key to the efficient, effective, and equitable delivery of UFSM are therefore strong mechanisms that facilitate collaboration between stakeholders and across sectors to make best use of resources and share good practice. These relationships can help highlight what modern school meals are able to deliver in terms of public perception and in mainstream media.

5.1. The roll-out of UFSM

The introduction of UFSM and commitment to the 'Good Food Nation' Bill provides an incentive for the Scottish Government, local authorities & partners, as well as children, families and local communities across Scotland to identify the opportunities and challenges to the successful implementation of universal 'Good Food' provision in schools, incorporate school food in wider conversations about food and drink in Scotland and collaborate closely on shared policy objectives and goals.

Ensuring wide stakeholder representation of all actors across the school food system in the FSM Programme Operation Group is vital for facilitating communication and collaboration across sectors to ensure that the multiple opportunities for serving 'Good Food' procurement and provision are harnessed for the maximum benefit of children, families, local communities, and the environment.

5.2. Collaboration on recipes & menus

To ensure the equitable provision of health and nutritious meals across Scotland requires collaboration across local authorities in recipe development and sharing of expertise. The development and maintenance of a national recipe book of school meals (hot and cold) can ensure that all recipes meet nutritional standards, are easily updatable, and can be adapted to account for regional and cultural preferences and supply chain contexts. A national school meal recipe book will free up local resources to focus on local service provision and supply chain collaboration.

6. Develop robust common standards and methods for measuring impact

A 'Good Food' approach to the delivery of UFSM has the potential to deliver on multiple targets across sustainability, public health, food insecurity and community wealth building. To ensure that those targets are being met and progress can be monitored, the development of robust common standards for school meal services and methods for measuring their impact are crucial.

Local authorities already collect information about budgets, school meal uptake, customer satisfaction and food waste. Extending existing tools and methods to indicators such as carbon footprint and local economic impact could be a useful pathway to develop a universal mechanism to ensure high quality and sustainability of school meals across Scotland. The development and implementation of new school food service standards could complement the regulatory nutritional standards by promoting and ensuring best practice in key areas such as canteen design, length of lunch service; ordering systems (including available choice); canteen supervision; wider school food culture etc. all of which are known to impact on what, and how much children eat, and what is wasted. Investment in research is required to measure the impact of adopting new standards.

The Food for Life Served Here (FFLSH) Award which currently certifies 17 of Scotland's local authorities provides an existing framework for ensuring 'Good Food' is served in schools and provides an example of how 'Good Food' standards can be set alongside nutritional regulations. Encouraging local authorities to take-up FFLSH certification could be one step on the path to ensure universal provision of 'Good Food' in schools across Scotland.

IV. Conclusion

The provision of UFSM in Scotland's schools coupled with the commitment to bring the 'Good Food Nation Bill' into law represents a unique opportunity to invest in procuring and serving 'Good Food' with wide-reaching benefits for children and young people, their communities, Scotland's economy and the environment. This opportunity is widely recognised by actors across Scotland's school food service who support this ambitious outlook for the implementation of UFSM, based on the strong foundations and commitment already in place across Scotland. This Discussion Paper constitutes the beginning of regular discussions about how to realise the full potential of a 'Good Food' approach to UFSM as part of Scotland's green recovery while ensuring that our children and young people receive the good quality meals they deserve. There has never been a better time to invest in serving 'Good Food' and harness the benefits for Scotland's future.