

Brexit and school food

Brexit has created uncertainty for the food and agricultural sector generally and school food services in particular. The School Food Plan Alliance^a asked Public Health Nutrition Research^b to investigate disquiet amongst the major players in school food catering and front-line school catering staff.

Concerns about the impact of Brexit on food and labour costs, the integrity of the food supply chain, and staff availability have been voiced amongst those responsible for delivering school food services. The aim of this research was to get an overview of those concerns and to understand the possible impacts of Brexit on school food catering.

The project gathered information from three sources:

- *Interviews with school food caterers and food providers*
- *Online questionnaire completed by front line school catering staff*
- *Current literature such as Select Committee reports, newspaper articles, and expert and consumer reports*

Between May and June 2018, fifteen interviews were completed with heads of major catering companies (LA and non-LA), membership organizations (such as APSE), academics, and campaigning organizations with an interest in school food and child nutrition. In addition, 64 school food catering staff completed an online survey. These were mainly head cooks or catering managers, school cooks, or other members of the catering staff.

Interviews

Overall, Brexit was seen as likely to have a negative impact on services and provision.

- The biggest concern was increased costs in food, the supply chain and wages. Food price rises had already begun to affect costs. This put pressure on services and quality and was creating a need to increase prices to parents. Food quality is likely to go down, and some foods would be either more expensive or less available, especially fruit and vegetables. Loss of some items had already occurred because of dramatic price increases, for example, from local suppliers (e.g. yogurt) or non-domestic suppliers (seasonal fruit and veg).
- Staffing was not likely to be a problem at school level but rather in the supply chain, production and transport. This would be exacerbated by loss of EU staff because of reduced net EU immigration. Difficulties in filling staff vacancies in transport and fruit and vegetable picking were already evident.

^a The School Food Plan Alliance (<http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/sfp-alliance/>) acts as the independent voice of the school food sector and offers a platform for collaboration between its members. Membership is made up of leading organisations with an interest in school food and aims to represent the widest possible audience. The aim of the Alliance is to be the on-going champions of the School Food Plan's Vision, its Brand and its 17 actions (<http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/>). Further information on school food standards can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-food-standards-resources-for-schools>

^b www.phnresearch.org.uk

- Fuel cost increases will have an impact on food costs. Any form of customs barrier or tariffs will also cause a rise in food costs. Availability of fresh and seasonal foods, especially fruit and vegetables, is likely to go down.
- If food prices rise, this will have a negative impact on services because school food budgets are not usually ring-fenced. School food is often at the bottom of a list of priorities for schools coping with budget cuts. Reduced Free School Meal registration (relating to UIFSM) and its impact on Pupil Premium are creating further problems.
- UIFSM has a positive impact on economies of scale, but a static budget since 2014 makes it increasingly difficult for many schools to cover costs. Whilst the £2.30 allocation for universal infant free school meals (UIFSM) is working in large schools, it is no longer sufficient to cover costs in schools with fewer children on roll. There is no current prospect of the UIFSM budget allocation being reviewed.
- Small schools (with fewer than 150 on roll) have been hit the hardest.
- As food prices rise and school lunch costs go up, health inequalities are likely to increase because low income families will not be able to afford school meals and will rely instead on packed lunches, repeatedly shown to be less healthy. Universal Credit has compounded this issue by making many low-income families ineligible for Free School Meals.

Online survey

A link to the online survey was sent out via the membership organizations that sit on the School Food Plan Alliance. 198 respondents began the survey, of which 64 (32.2%) completed it. The results below relate to the 64 complete responses.

Respondents were members of the Lead Association for Catering in Education (LACA, n=43), School Food Matters (10), Food for Life (8) and other membership organizations (11). They were head cooks or catering managers in the primary (44%) or secondary (17%) sectors, or cooks (16%) or other members of school food staff (23%). The majority were from the primary sector (maintained, 47%; academy, 20%); 19% were from the secondary sector, and 14% from schools with other age distributions. Because the majority of respondents were members of LACA, most (59%) were from local authority catering providers, 20% were in-school catering providers, and the rest from private (13%) or other providers (8%).

Support for staff providing school food services came from Food for Life (58%), LACA (45%), a nutritionist from the LA or health services (30%), School Food Matters (27%), healthy school coordinators (19%), or other sources (5%-8%).

Most staff were of UK origin (79%), 10% were non-UK from within the EU, and 9% from outside the EU.

When asked what impact Brexit would have on staffing in schools, 45% of respondents said there were no EU staff in their school and 41% that Brexit would have no impact. 5% thought the number of EU staff would go down. This reflects the fact that many staff had children or grandchildren in the school or saw the school as a local employer offering flexible hours.

Of those who held an opinion regarding the impact of Brexit on the cost of food, around three-quarters thought costs would rise. While most respondents felt that Brexit would have no overall impact on the variety, quality or safety of food in schools, many did feel that the variety or quality of

food would go down (15% and 12%, respectively). 15% thought more food would be sourced locally, and 9% that there would be an adverse impact on children's health. Fruit and vegetables were thought to be the food groups most likely to be affected adversely, but meat and dairy were also mentioned.

Because the sample is small and not random or regionally representative, the findings have limited generalizability. Nonetheless, they provide insight into concerns about the impact of Brexit on school food catering and services.

The most commonly expressed concerns from both interviewees and front-line catering staff related to:

- the increase in the costs of food
- the inability to respond to budgets under pressure (e.g. rising food costs and no change in the UIFSM cost allocation)
- the reduced availability of fresh and seasonal foods
- reduced access to labour (especially food transport drivers and fruit and vegetable pickers)
- the risk of increased health inequalities because of reduced access to healthy food at lunchtime caused by budget pressures on families who can no longer afford school meals and are forced to opt for packed lunches.

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The analysis and views expressed in this report are those of the author.

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