April 2026

# Delivering Nourish in secondary schools

## Evidence informed recommendations

# Introduction

The Nourish programme is School Food Matters' flagship school food improvement programme that supports schools to create a food environment that puts children and young people's nutrition first.

Nourish is a multi-component programme that stretches across an entire academic year, involving everyone across the school community: from parents to school governors, catering staff to children and young people. Nourish schools are supported to develop their own bespoke school food action plan and policy, covering food throughout the school day, while fostering a positive food culture and integrating food education.

The programme offers training and workshops for staff and parents to build the skills and confidence needed to offer nutritious alternatives. Dedicated Nourish Project Officers also offer engaging, hands-on sessions with students to hear their opinions and ideas, which in turn go on to inform policy changes, recipes and menu design.

Nourish is underpinned by, and promotes, a whole school approach to food. Whole School Approaches (WSA) are part of the health-promoting school framework developed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in the 1980s, which aimed to improve the health and education of adolescents within school settings (1). In the UK, awareness of the approach has grown, with a WSA to food promoted through the School Food Plan (2). The plan outlined that a WSA to food should encompass multiple areas of school life and functions, and should bring together senior school staff, young people, kitchen staff, teachers, governors and parents (2).

A WSA to food is about making food a positive part of everyday school life. It connects what children and young people learn in the classroom with what they eat in the dining hall, and involves everyone in building a strong food culture that supports health, wellbeing and learning (3,4).

## Why this research?

While Nourish has been successfully delivered by School Food Matters in more than 100 schools in England, implementation has largely been in primary schools and has proved more challenging in secondary schools. Furthermore, best practices for a WSA to food are often based on research from primary schools which differ significantly from secondary schools.

Secondary school contexts are more varied and complex than primaries, and this is reflected in their food environment. Factors such as inflexible timetables, fixed curricula, varied food provision models, larger and more diverse school populations, greater student autonomy, and stronger external food influences make these settings harder to influence in terms of food provision, culture, and education (5,6).

Whilst historically there has been limited focus on interventions to improve food in secondary schools, recent research has consistently highlighted the need for effective intervention to improve secondary school food environments and provision. Areas of concern include food not meeting the government's school food standards, food not appealing to students and the high prevalence of nutrient-poor grab and go options. At the same time, caterers are facing challenges to providing food within a tight budget with rising food and labour costs (5,7–10).

School Food Matters, with funding from Ocado, commissioned the University of Birmingham to carry out research to better understand the barriers and facilitators to delivery of Nourish in secondary schools. The research put forward recommendations on how to adapt the programme to better suit the needs and priorities of secondary schools.

This adaptation work takes inspiration from, and is a sister project to Adapt-Ed, an NIHR-funded study led by the University of Hertfordshire and the University of Essex, exploring how best to adapt Nourish to special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) settings (see further reading).

# Methods

The research involved four phases:

1. A rapid review of current academic and grey literature on school food interventions in UK-based secondary settings.
2. Interviews with three members of the Nourish delivery team and a secondary school leader who had recently completed Nourish, to understand more about the experiences of delivering and receiving the intervention.
3. Six workshops to gather views on how Nourish could be adapted for secondary schools (two workshops with 34 students; one with 17 sector representatives from charities, local authorities and policy organisations; one with nine caterers; one with five parents; and one with five school staff).
4. The findings from phases 1-3 were combined to develop recommendations for delivery.

A Steering Group met throughout to guide the research, and recommendations were discussed with the Nourish delivery team and a Youth Panel from youth activist organisation Bite Back, with the final set of recommendations reflecting this feedback and the feasibility of delivery.

The full rapid review has been published separately (11), and a more detailed account of the project methods can be found in the full report.

# Research findings

The research identified five conditions for success of the Nourish programme in secondary schools. These are outlined below, along with the key facilitators and recommendations to support their implementation. They also aim to benefit others working to improve school food in secondary schools.

# Condition 1

**A 'slow and steady' approach that takes account of the school's particular context and challenges is needed to make the Nourish intervention feasible and sustainable in secondaries**

A longer-term, incremental approach was identified as a key facilitator of engagement and sustainability in secondary schools. The research found that secondary settings respond more positively to making small, manageable changes over time, rather than intensive, short-term interventions. Evidence from the rapid review supports this, highlighting that longer timeframes allow schools time for reflection and adaptation, with incremental actions having an additive effect in progressing towards a WSA to food (12–15).

This approach was also supported by interview and workshop findings. In the past, the Nourish delivery team has found that secondaries are less able to engage with an intensive approach to delivery, making them more likely than primaries to disengage part-way through the programme.

School staff supported the importance of flexible timelines, including the option to extend beyond a single academic year, to allow schools adequate time to work on smaller steps towards a WSA.

> **"There's never an ideal timeline for the schools. There's always something or the other that happens. But I think you need to consider not being very pedantic about this timeline, and sometimes tailor making it to each school in each context."** School staff member

Clear and simple communication was also identified as a key facilitator. Given competing priorities and limited capacity in secondary schools, participants highlighted the importance of setting out expectations clearly from the outset, including through recruitment materials that outline the 'slow and steady' approach and provide a clear and succinct description of what the project will involve.

> **"…what I wonder with a lot of things with schools, is how can we make things easier? And how can we communicate how simple something might be if it's simple, and if it's not simple then how can make it simpler?"** Sector representative

In addition, findings highlighted the value of tailored pathways, enabling schools to prioritise areas of focus and progress at an appropriate pace. This includes the current practice of breaking down school food policies into smaller areas of focus (e.g. hydration, packed lunches, food education).

> **"Any changes that we agree as part of this intervention needs to be realistic, because very often I have seen change management in schools especially they become very lofty at the time of implementation, but over a period of time they just die a natural death because it's not sustainable or it's not practical."** School staff member

Findings also suggested that the programme should test whether more frequent contact (both online and in-person) can support schools to maintain momentum while implementing smaller steps over time.

# Condition 2

## Effective delivery of Nourish in secondaries requires more intensive engagement of students

The importance of meaningfully involving students in a WSA to food was emphasised in all phases of the research. The rapid review found clear links between student-led work and improved efficacy and impact (16–26). During workshops, students demonstrated consistent interest, willingness and ability to be involved in school food improvement activities.

> **"We have mental health ambassadors and anti-bullying, and attendance and stuff. Every form. But there's no food ambassador, because if there was food or nutritious ambassador you could talk more about food and food options."** Student

Other groups also highlighted the impact of young people's involvement in a WSA to food.

> **"Just by engaging with a group of students and doing that in a structured planned way and involving our caterers made a bit of a difference actually."** School Staff Member

However, students consistently reported that they feel that their involvement in school food is often tokenistic, highlighting a need for more meaningful engagement. It is therefore important that the Nourish programme creates structured opportunities for student voice to be taken seriously and embedded within a clear feedback loop, where input is visibly acted upon. Recommended approaches included surveys, student forums, student groups or student-led food improvement programmes.

> **"What would make me be involved, if we actually saw a change, there was actually different stuff."** Student

# Condition 3

**Effective delivery of Nourish in secondaries requires more intensive engagement of school catering teams and strategic support within catering organisations**

Catering teams play a central role in shaping school food environments in secondary schools and are key to the successful delivery of a WSA to food. However, they face significant challenges, including competing with the external food environment, delivering nutritious menus at scale, and working within school settings that may lack suitable dining spaces.

Evidence from the rapid review (21,22) and workshops highlighted the importance of making caterers feel like part of the school community, as part of the WSA to food. Interviews also found that lack of communication between catering teams and school staff had previously hampered successful Nourish implementation in secondaries.

Engagement of catering teams was therefore identified as a key facilitator. Recommendations include ensuring caterers are involved in initial and ongoing meetings and working groups, included in decision-making, auditing, goal setting and progress monitoring, and recognised and celebrated within the school.

> **"Quite often as caterers we get overlooked in that decision-making. So, we don't usually get invited to the meetings where they decide how they're going to... how much time they're going to allocate for lunch and breaks and things like that."** Caterer

> **"I think we're all trying to achieve the same thing, but to ensure Nourish can achieve its aims it actually needs to work with the caterers."** Caterer

Training for catering teams was highlighted as a key facilitator for implementation. The rapid review highlighted the importance of providing training for kitchen staff to build skills, knowledge and confidence in preparing nutritious food for young people (27,28). Workshop participants supported this, emphasising the value of inspiring food training to strengthen skills, passion and motivation, alongside targeted training on allergens and SEND-related dietary needs.

> **"I think understanding what's in food, especially because a lot of our staff are two/three hours on the serving hatch, and they just see a vegetable and bean lasagne etc, but they don't understand why we're doing the vegetable and bean lasagne, what's the proteins in there, taking away meat protein etc, they just see as I'm coming in for two hours a day, and all I'm going to do is serve the children, follow the allergen matrixes, wash it up and then go home. It would be lovely to have the time, the effort and the support to increase [kitchen staff's] knowledge of what's in the food and why are we serving that food."** Caterer

Workshops also highlighted the importance of strategic support within catering organisations, to empower and enable school catering teams to engage with the WSA to food.

> **"...each school has an investment [from a social impact fund], and they can make a choice over what's important to them, whether that be something around environment, whether that be something about their community, and whether that be something around engaging students and their parents in food..."** Caterer

# Condition 4

## Input from other external partners can magnify and sustain the gains made through Nourish in secondaries

Across the research stages, gaining input from external partners was seen as a key facilitator to strengthen delivery and support schools. Recommendations include engaging with local authorities, multi-academy trusts (MATs), large catering providers and third sector organisations.

During workshops, engaging local authorities was recommended to support recruitment, understand the local food environment, and connect schools with local organisations working in school food. Centralising this information was highlighted as a way to reduce the burden on schools in identifying relevant support.

> **"I think that's a key thing is actually just getting the message out there about things that are available to schools is really important, and they don't always necessarily know what's out there or having to comb through all the information when they do a Google search, actually if you've got it all in one place then you're able to streamline that."** Sector representative

The rapid review found that making use of existing third sector training programmes (19,22,24) can support both kitchen staff and the delivery of food education in secondary schools, which is often patchy and inconsistent, and given low priority compared with other curricular topics (7). This was reflected in workshops, with schools, caterers and students noting increased engagement when activities are led by external organisations bringing new expertise and perspectives.

> **"Engagement sometimes can be a lot better when you get someone external in, because it's a different face and it's a different voice to what they're hearing on a daily basis."** School staff member

> **"We need that expertise because we don't have that. We can learn from that, but we need that expertise to hold our hands and to work alongside us and to nudge things along a bit."** School staff member

> **"On one of our [introductory days] we should get somebody from a food place to come in and talk to us about careers in food…Or cook food, because talking about food and not doing it is bad."** Student

Given that many secondary schools operate within MATs, participants emphasised the importance of engaging trusts and large catering providers to support a more centralised approach, potentially enabling changes to be cascaded across multiple schools.

> **"There are many trusts now that are blueprint trusts, whereby all the schools do the same thing, and actually I'd suggest with all the different competing agendas at the moment that's probably the place to target."** Sector representative

A further facilitator was support for schools to understand and implement national school food policy. This included providing clear guidance, communicating policy changes, and signposting practical secondary specific resources to support implementation.

> **"So again, it's making sure that they're aware of the policies, any changes, communicating that. I guess that's where we see our role, and letting them know what they can do and resources they can access to implement those policies and develop their own ones, especially those whole school approach ones."** Sector representative

# Condition 5

**Within the challenging context of secondaries, celebrating successes throughout Nourish is vital**

Celebrating progress was identified as a key facilitator of engagement. The value of recognising and sharing successes across the school community to build motivation and support for a WSA to food was highlighted in the rapid review (4,29) and the workshops.

Workshop participants recommended that project set up includes discussion of the school's vision and goals for a WSA to food, so that progress can be clearly tracked and celebrated. Workshop participants also reported that monitoring the impact of changes upon e.g. student satisfaction, school meal uptake, can help keep schools motivated and engaged. Ongoing monitoring through regular meetings with representatives from across the school community should support reflection on progress and the effectiveness of changes made. These meetings should include students, who made it clear that they would like to be involved with decisions around school food.

> **"I think it's really important when we've been trying to work with schools, is actually giving some acknowledgement to what they've already done in that area, and it not feeling like this is what we've got left to do, and this really big project, because capacity is an issue. So, it's about saying actually we know you've done all of this work and that's really positive, let's take a moment to celebrate that."** Sector representative

> **"I think also with that it should be say one student from each year, and that student sees the common opinion of everyone in their year, and then says that, and gets everyone's opinion first, and then speaks on their behalf."** Student

Providing opportunities for schools to learn from each other by sharing good practice through 'communities of practice' or the development of 'flagship' or 'champion' schools was also recommended. These opportunities would provide additional support for schools and could support recruitment of further schools.

> **"I suppose a flagship in each borough. You've got a great example of a primary, you've got great example of a secondary and a special school… and then going forward having points throughout the academic year where you can not only hear from those schools, but you've got interventions."** Sector representative

> **"Could you make the schools that have gone through the programme like for want of a better word, a flagship school, and then you can point other schools in that area to that school, and say "Look, go and talk to them, this is their experiences, this is what they've achieved." So, it keeps them… the standard high, and it will keep them on board for longer maybe."** Caterer

## What's next?

School Food Matters is currently using these findings to support the adaptation of a Nourish Programme tailored to secondary schools. This adapted programme will be tested in a group of secondary schools across England. It is also hoped that the recommendations arising from this study will benefit others working to improve school food in secondary schools.

## Further reading

To find these resources visit our research page at **schoolfoodmatters.org.**

Dobell A, Murphy M, Pallan M. How can Whole School Approaches to food be adapted to better suit the needs, preferences and priorities of secondary school settings? – a rapid review (2025)

Adapt-Ed Improving school food for children with SEND (2025)

Thanks to Ocado Retail for generously funding this research.

Thanks also to Alexandra Dobell, Estera Sevel, Marie Murphy and Miranda Pallan at the University of Birmingham for delivering the research; to Emily Dawson for preparing this summary and project managing for School Food Matters; and to Eve Blair for supervising the project. We are also grateful to the Steering Group for their guidance throughout the study: Abigail Page, Andy Gold, Bruce Kidd, Carla Cotton, Dan Gallagher, Jenny Pittam, Katherine Breckon, Louise Davies, Louise Foreman, Myles Bremner, Naomi Duncan, Pepe Di'Iasio, Rebecca O'Connell, Saher Shah, Suzanne Spence and Vickie Hacking. Thanks also to our colleagues at Bite Back for supporting the set-up of a Youth Panel to help shape the recommendations.

## References


1. World Health Organisation. Regional guidelines : development of health-promoting schools - a framework for action [Internet]. 1996. Available from: https://iris.who.int/server/api/core/bitstreams/2fe154be-327e-4589-8833-ab4cd9126098/content
2. Dimbleby H, Vincent J. The School Food Plan [Internet]. 2013. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fb407d28fa8f54aada6df60/The_School_Food_Plan.pdf
3. Edmonds R. Newham Council [Internet]. Newham Council. Whole School Approach to Food. Located at: Newham, London, England, United Kingdom. Available from: https://www.newham.gov.uk/school-meals-newham/whole-school-approach-food
4. School Food 4 Change. A Whole School Food Apporach: Guidelines for schools & cities/regions [Internet]. 2022. Available from: https://schoolfood4change.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/SF4C_WholeSchoolFoodApproach_Framework_EN_web_new.pdf
5. Woodside JV, O'Kane N, Pallan M, Evans CEL, Defeyter G, Brownlee I, et al. The Generating Excellent Nutrition in UK Schools (GENIUS) network: working towards a more health-promoting food and nutrition system in UK schools. Proc Nutr Soc. 2024 Nov 18;1–12. doi:10.1017/S0029665124007560 PubMed PMID: 39552357.
6. O'Kane N, Hunter R, Schliemann D, Garcia L, Woodside J, Generating Excellent Nutrition in UK Schools (GENIUS) Network. Factors contributing to food choice in the UK secondary school food setting: a systems map perspective. Public Health Nutr. 2025 Dec 3;28(1):e208. doi:10.1017/S136898002510147X PubMed PMID: 41331949; PubMed Central PMCID: PMC12809607.
7. Pallan M, Morrison B, Pokhilenko I, Sitch A, Frew E, Rawdin C, et al. School food policy in secondary schools in England and its impact on adolescents' diets and dental health: the FUEL multiple-methods study. 2024.
8. McHugh C, Lloyd J, Logan S, Wyatt K. Enablers and barriers English secondary schools face in promoting healthy diet and physical activity behaviours. Health Promot Int. 2022 Apr 29;37(2):daab148. doi:10.1093/heapro/daab148 PubMed PMID: 34491343; PubMed Central PMCID: PMC9067442.
9. Hawkins A, Rundle R. School food hero and the battle of the food foes: A story of public health policy, power imbalance and potential. Soc Sci Med. 2024 Feb 1;342:116520. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2023.116520
10. Bite Back. Quick, cheap and profitable - Who is benefitting from the rise in grab-and-go canteen culture at the expense of child health? [Internet]. 2026 [cited 2026 Apr 10]. Available from: https://cdn.bitebackmedia.com/media/documents/Bite_Back___Grab_and_go_research_report__high_res_4.pdf
11. Dobell A, Murphy M, Pallan M. How can Whole School Approaches to food be adapted to better suit the needs,. 2024.
12. ICF. Evaluation of the Nourish programme [Internet]. 2026. Available from: https://www.schoolfoodmatters.org/sites/default/files/2026-01/N-report-DIGITAL.pdf
13. Moore L, de Silva-Sanigorski A, Moore SN. A socio-ecological perspective on behavioural interventions to influence food choice in schools: alternative, complementary or synergistic? Public Health Nutr. 2013 Jun;16(6):1000–5. doi:10.1017/S1368980012005605 PubMed PMID: 23452873; PubMed Central PMCID: PMC3663083.
14. Capper T, Brennan S, Woodside J, McKinley M. The EIT Food School Network: Integrating solutions to improve eating habits and reduce food wastage in secondary schoolchildren. Nutr Bull. 2019;44(4):356–62. doi:10.1111/nbu.12406
15. Rose K, O'Malley C, Lake AA, Lalli GS. 'Doing school food!': a practical toolkit for adopting a whole school food approach. Perspect Public Health. 2026 Jan;146(1):29–37. doi:10.1177/17579139231185302 PubMed PMID: 37846731.
16. Murphy M, Mensah D, Mylona E, Oyebode O. Acceptability and feasibility of strategies to promote healthy dietary choices in UK secondary school canteens: a qualitative study. BMC Res Notes. 2021 Sep 20;14(1):365. doi:10.1186/s13104-021-05778-3 PubMed PMID: 34544486; PubMed Central PMCID: PMC8454098.
17. Ensaff H, Homer M, Sahota P, Braybrook D, Coan S, McLeod H. Food Choice Architecture: An Intervention in a Secondary School and its Impact on Students' Plant-based Food Choices. Nutrients. 2015 Jun 2;7(6):4426–37. doi:10.3390/nu7064426 PubMed PMID: 26043039; PubMed Central PMCID: PMC4488793.
18. Bell SL, Audrey S, Cooper AR, Noble S, Campbell R. Lessons from a peer-led obesity prevention programme in English schools. Health Promot Int. 2017 Apr 1;32(2):250–9. doi:10.1093/heapro/dau008 PubMed PMID: 24711350; PubMed Central PMCID: PMC5914335.
19. Bite Back. Bite Back in Schools Information pack [Internet]. 2025. Available from: https://cdn.bitebackmedia.com/media/documents/Information_pack_2025_14_May.pdf
20. Food Active and Health Equalities Group. Fuelling the Future: How does secondary school food fare for our young people? [Internet]. 2024. Available from: https://foodactive.org.uk/fuelling-the-future-how-does-secondary-school-food-fare-for-our-young-people
21. Defeyter G, Yee J, Spencer N, Round. A Day in the Life of a Secondary School Pupil in Relation to School Food [Internet]. Available from: https://www.schoolfoodmatters.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/A%20Day%20in%20the%20Life%20of%20a%20Secondary%20School%20Pupil%20in%20Relation%20to%20School%20Food.pdf
22. Bean Meals. Transforming school food for the better [Internet]. 2025. Available from: https://www.eci.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-02/BeanMeals_Transforming_school_food.pdf
23. Calvert S, Dempsey R, Povey R. A qualitative evaluation of an in-school Social Norms Approach intervention for reducing unhealthy snacking behaviours amongst secondary school students. Br Food J. 2024 Jun 11;126(7):2970–81. doi:10.1108/BFJ-02-2024-0166
24. Best Food Forward [Internet]. Secondary Schools Food Education. Available from: https://www.bestfoodforward.co.uk/secondary-schools
25. McSweeney L, Bradley J, Adamson AJ, Spence S. The 'Voice' of Key Stakeholders in a School Food and Drink Intervention in Two Secondary Schools in NE England: Findings from a Feasibility Study. Nutrients. 2019 Nov 12;11(11):2746. doi:10.3390/nu11112746 PubMed PMID: 31726753; PubMed Central PMCID: PMC6893517.
26. Devine LD, Gallagher AM, Briggs S, Hill AJ. Factors that influence food choices in secondary school canteens: a qualitative study of pupil and staff perspectives. Front Public Health. 2023;11:1227075. doi:10.3389/fpubh.2023.1227075 PubMed PMID: 37522007; PubMed Central PMCID: PMC10375012.
27. Food a Fact of Life. Free education resources for teaching young people aged 3-16 years about where food comes from, cooking and healthy eating, and teacher training. - Food A Fact Of Life [Internet]. Available from: https://www.foodafactoflife.org.uk/
28. Langford R, Bonell C, Jones H, Campbell R. Obesity prevention and the Health promoting Schools framework: essential components and barriers to success. Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act. 2015 Feb 13;12:15. doi:10.1186/s12966-015-0167-7 PubMed PMID: 25885800; PubMed Central PMCID: PMC4330926.
29. Creative Education. 20 Ways to Promote a Healthy Eating Culture in Schools [Internet]. 2024. Available from: https://www.creativeeducation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/20-Ways-to-Promote-a-Healthy-Eating-Culture-in-Schools.pdf

www.schoolfoodmatters.org

Charity Number 1134094

SCHOOL FOOD MATTERS