Report on the Healthy Schools Rating Scheme - Beta Test
School Food Matters - April 2020
Part 1

A. Background to the scheme

The concept of a healthy schools rating scheme (HSRS) first appeared in August 2016, with the publication of the Childhood Obesity Plan. The reasoning behind setting up a new rating scheme is outlined in Chapter One of the Plan: to help schools “recognise and encourage their contribution to preventing obesity by helping children to eat better and move more”, and for parents to be “confident their children are attending schools which provide healthy food and opportunities for physical activity”. The scheme was not introduced until July 2019, when it was finally launched by the Department for Education (DfE) as a 'beta phase'. The first schools eligible to participate could do so in the second half of the first term (after October half term break).

B. Summary of Concerns

- **Confusing eligibility and opt-in process**: Guidance suggests any school can opt-in and makes no mention of a group of randomly selected schools that have been given a start date at a set point in the academic year. Process to opt-in is complicated and varies by region.

- **The time, effort and resources to participate**: HSRS is embedded within the broader Active Lives survey which requires at least 30 children to participate - plus a parent component – which creates an extra burden for already busy schools.

- **Delay in results**: Results take approximately four months to come through and this lessens the impact of the award and undermines the importance of the scheme.

- **Lack of focus on healthy eating at school**: Questions in the Active Lives survey mostly focus on physical activity, with very limited focus on healthy eating at school. Embedding the scheme within the Active Lives survey diminishes the value of the scheme.

C. Our involvement

When Chapter One of the Childhood Obesity Plan was published in 2016, School Food Matters (SFM) strongly welcomed the suggestion of a healthy schools rating scheme; not least because we believed it supported actions already committed to by Government under the School Food Plan. Actions #9 and #10 - explained in depth in Chapter 12 of the School Food Plan - describe changes in the way Ofsted will conduct inspections, including to consider the ways a school promotes healthy lifestyles along with a series of health measures the government agreed to monitor and evaluate.

We believed the concept of a healthy schools rating scheme would go some way to fulfilling the commitments under the School Food Plan, by providing an important source of evidence of the steps taken by schools to promote healthy eating, and to check for compliance of statutory regulations.
In early 2019 – with the rating scheme still not in place - we reached out to parents, school staff and governors to gauge support, and in March 2019 we released a report with our results. It was clear the concept of a healthy schools rating scheme had broad support:

- 97% of those we surveyed were in favour of the introduction of the HSRS
- When asked if the scheme should be mandatory, 85% of respondents agreed
- 93% were in favour of the HSRS being applied to all state funded schools
- When asked if Ofsted should monitor the scheme, 72% of all people surveyed (and 76% of parents) agreed.

It was also clear that the HSRS was thought to be a way to monitor healthy eating: from parents expressing a desire to see how schools compare in their lunch offerings, to teachers looking for recognition for the hard work they put into supporting healthy eating, to catering staff who believed it would help ‘foster a whole school inclusive approach to food’.

After the announcement of the HSRS Beta Phase in July 2019, we informed DfE that we would conduct a ‘test’ of the scheme, working with schools to provide feedback on the usability of the scheme.

Part 2

A. Understanding the process

The new healthy schools rating scheme is not a standalone programme; rather, it comprises a set of new questions that have been added to the existing Active Lives – Children and Young People survey, a self-assessment tool with questions about physical activity and school food. The Active Lives survey is administered by Sports England, and the affiliated ‘Active Partnerships’ in each region. The questions do not have a strong focus on healthy eating at school. They focus mainly on physical activity - including student travel to and from school.

The first port of call for any school interested in the HSRS is the guidance to the scheme published by the DfE in July 2019. This guidance outlines that schools are free to opt in to the scheme. However, we later learned this is only for schools that have not already been randomly selected by Sports England and placed on a list of schools to participate later in the academic year. School Food Matters was not given access to these lists.

Under the process outlined in the HSRS guidance, for a school to opt-in they must contact their local Active Partnership. Each Active Partnership is tasked with recruiting the schools in their area and the process for opting in varies region by region with varying degrees of clarity. In some regions the process is relatively simple. There is a dedicated webpage for the Active Lives survey, including information about the inclusion of the healthy schools rating scheme, with a button at the bottom of the page linking to an online form for a headteacher, or other suitable representative, to complete. Other regions directed interested schools to a contact person if they wanted to opt-in, while some simply provided a generic info@ email address.
Whatever the opt-in process, after the deadline for each round, the Active Partnership in each region contacts the schools that were randomly selected by Sports England and attempts to recruit them to the Active Lives survey. They also contact any schools that attempted to opt-in to inform them whether they were eligible in the current round. The schools that are eligible to participate are then sent a unique URL to the Active Lives survey. It is only at this point that it is made clear to schools that in order to participate in the Active Lives survey (and by extension to take part in the HSRS) the school must arrange the participation of at least 30 students in the survey, including a specific section for the parents.

We also discovered there is a long ‘lag time’ at each step of the process. For example, many schools that attempted to opt-in to Round 1, taking place in the second half of first term (after October ½ term break) had to wait until after the deadline of 11 October to find out whether they were even eligible to participate. They then had until late December to complete the Active Lives survey, and, a time of writing, schools have not yet received a rating from the scheme (these are due in April 2020).

B. Feedback from schools

In order to test the scheme, we worked with 25 schools across multiple regions: Berkshire, Bristol, Devon, Halifax, Hull, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Shropshire, Walsall, and York. Comments featured in this report are the result of subsequent conversations (in person and over the phone), emails, and responses provided within an online survey we created to record schools’ experiences.

We spoke mainly to headteachers, although some schools delegated responsibility to a member of the senior leadership team (SLT), or to other members of staff such as their PE or food teachers.

Of the 25 schools participating:

- ten reported attempting to contact their local Active Partnership representatives but not being given any further information
- four did receive a response but were told they were ineligible to participate at the current time
- one school was told they could opt-in, but were encouraged to wait, as it looked ‘likely your school has been randomly selected by Sport England to take part in the survey next term’.

“I spent over an hour trying to work out the system, only to be told we were not eligible.”

“Right now we are being turned away, and very little information is being provided to those who try to opt in.”

“I support the idea [of an HSRS] but it should be a much easier process. Should be able to do straight away, without two or three step activation.”
In one circumstance the Active Partnership representative even misunderstood the request to opt-in entirely, replying that “they don’t run a feedback survey on the healthy schools rating scheme”.

Schools also commented on the time, effort and resources needed to participate, factoring in the time spent by the leadership team getting in contact with at least 30 families. One school noted the parents’ component was the most difficult, as the school would need to provide the technology and then walk each family through the process.

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In terms of the survey itself, while the HSRS was created to measure healthy eating at school, there is a notable lack of specific focus on measures taken by schools in this area.

“I think every [school] should be able to do this, as soon as they feel they are able to”

The survey is predominantly focused on physical activity. In addition, schools reported that even some of the questions that were food related were inappropriate for the context, noting that ‘pupils assisting catering staff preparing food’ is rare in schools.

Schools that were told they ineligible to participate found the lack of information on how healthy eating is measured in the HSRS particularly frustrating, with one commenting they would like to have been given some information so they could at least prepare for when they could participate.

The long delay between doing the survey and receiving results was also a cause of frustration among participating schools. One noted the HSRS loses its impact because of the delay, with another saying the turnaround time of the scheme doesn’t really allow for growth or learning.

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Taken together, the confusing opt-in processes, heavy resourcing and extensive time delays has led to a negative perception of scheme and a reluctance to recommend it to colleagues working at other schools. Most of the schools we talked to felt they were unable to recommend taking part in the scheme, as they could not participate themselves.

“You can’t get past the first hurdle. I’ve got nothing to recommend”

The schools we spoke to that did manage to complete the HSRS said they were either not very, or not at all, likely to recommend the scheme, noting that this “may change down the line, but at the moment it doesn’t seem useful”.

No one answered they would be likely or very likely to recommend.
Several headteachers who attempted to participate in the process noted how they supported the idea of a healthy schools rating scheme in principle, but that the process designed added more administrative burden on already busy schools.

C. Conclusion and next steps

Based on this experience testing the healthy schools rating scheme, School Food Matters believes the current scheme is not fit for purpose however, we remain committed to the concept as a tool to help parents have confidence their children are eating well at school and learning to keep themselves healthy.

We do not believe the healthy school rating scheme should be embedded within the *Active Lives* survey, as this dilutes the focus on healthy eating and makes the scheme difficult to access.

We encourage the Department for Education to convene an advisory group to assist in a redesign of the scheme.

References


“It could be done two – three times a year, rather than a single snapshot”
Appendix

Q6 How far did you get in your attempt to complete the HSRS survey?

Answered: 20   Skipped: 4

- **Step 1:** I attempted to... 50.00% 10
- **Step 2:** I was sent the... 20.00% 4
- **Step 3:** I completed and submitted answers to the HSRS questions, incorporated in the Active Lives survey 15.00% 3
- Comments? 65.00% 13

Total Respondents: 20
Q10 Based on your experience, would you encourage other schools to take part?

Answered: 13  Skipped: 11

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<th>ANSWER CHOICES</th>
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<td>1 - not at all likely to recommend</td>
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