



Primary School Chefs' Experiences of Implementing the
UK School Food Standards: A Qualitative Study on the
Challenges of Supporting Children's Diets in the Wirral.

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Abstract

School food provision plays a significant role in shaping children's dietary habits and attitudes towards nutrition from an early age. In the UK, the School Food Standards aim to ensure that children are provided with balanced and nutritious meals during the school day. While previous research has largely focused on policy outcomes and children's diets, there is a gap in the literature based on the perspectives of those responsible for implementing these standards in practice. Specifically, the experiences and insights of primary school chefs remain underexplored, despite their central role in translating policy into daily food provision.

The aims of this study are to explore primary school chefs' experiences of implementing the UK School Food Standards, focusing on how they interpret the guidelines and navigate challenges in supporting children's diets in the Wirral.

A qualitative research design was used to gain in-depth insights into participants' experiences. A purposive sample of six primary school chefs from across the Wirral was selected. Data was collected through in-person, semi-structured interviews, allowing for flexible responses while maintaining consistency across key topics. The interviews explored chefs' understanding of the standards, daily practices, perceived challenges, and views on children's food preferences. Data was analysed thematically to identify key patterns and recurring themes.

The findings are organised into four main themes: the interpretation and application of the School Food Standards, operational and resource constraints, children's food preferences as a barrier to implementation, and chefs' commitment to exceeding minimum requirements,

emphasising their care and responsibility. Participants demonstrated a strong understanding of the standards but highlighted significant challenges, including budget limitations, time pressures, and logistical constraints. A key finding was the impact of funding inequalities: schools in lower-income areas often received greater financial support through free school meal provision, whereas schools in more affluent areas reported greater difficulty meeting nutritional guidelines within limited budgets. Children's established food preferences were recognised as a significant barrier, with many pupils hesitant to try new or healthier options. In dining halls, there is limited encouragement for children because staffing constraints prevent chefs from effectively supporting and engaging pupils while managing their operational duties.

This study highlights the complex challenges of implementing the UK school food standards and the influence of school chefs on children's eating habits. Tackling funding inequalities and encouraging stronger collaboration among schools, parents, and carers could improve children's acceptance of healthy foods and boost the impact of the School Food Standards.

Keywords:

UK School Food Standards, primary school chefs, child nutrition, food provision, children's dietary behaviours, policy implementation

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Declaration

‘The results presented in this dissertation are based on my own research in the Faculty of Health, Liverpool John Moores University. All assistance received from other individuals and organisations has been acknowledged, and full reference is made to all published and unpublished sources used. This dissertation has not been previously submitted for a degree at any other institution.’

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Introduction

Childhood obesity is widely recognised as a significant public health issue, both globally and within the UK (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2022). The rising rates of overweight and obesity among children considerably impact their physical and mental health, as well as their overall well-being (World Health Organisation, 2025b). Moreover, it increases the risk of developing health problems in adulthood, since unhealthy eating habits formed at a young age are difficult to change (Alves and Alves, 2023). Promoting healthy eating in childhood is a crucial focus for public health initiatives. As schools play an important role in influencing children's dietary behaviours, providing regular access to food and shaping daily eating environments, a positive influence on children's nutrition can be achieved, given their ongoing growth and development (França et al., 2022).

In response to concerns about childhood nutrition, the UK government introduced the UK School Food Standards in 2014 to improve the nutritional quality of school meals (McIntyre et al., 2022). While existing research has largely focused on the nutritional outcomes of policies on school food provision, little research has examined the individuals responsible for translating policy into practice. Primary school chefs play a crucial role in menu planning, food preparation, and interacting with pupils; however, their experiences and perspectives remain unexplored. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate the implementation of the UK School Food Standards by exploring the experiences of primary school chefs through qualitative interviews.

Aim of study:

To explore primary school chefs' experiences of implementing the UK School Food Standards, with a focus on how they interpret the guidelines and navigate challenges in supporting children's diets in the Wirral.

Objectives of study:

1. To investigate how primary school chefs in the Wirral interpret and apply the UK School Food Standards when planning and preparing meals.
2. To identify the key challenges faced by primary school chefs in implementing the UK School Food Standards, including budget limitations, children's food preferences, and logistical constraints such as time pressures and meal service logistics.
3. To explore the strategies chefs use to balance nutritional guidelines given by the UK food standard with the practical demands of primary school children, and chefs' perceptions of how these practices influence children's diets.

Structure

This study is organised into four chapters. The first chapter provides a literature review, examining childhood obesity as a public health issue and exploring the roles of schools in shaping children's dietary behaviours. It also reviews previous policies and legislation and identifies a gap in existing research on primary school chefs' experiences. The second chapter outlines the methodology, explaining the qualitative approach, the use of semi-structured interviews with primary school chefs in the Wirral, and the methods for data collection. This chapter also discusses the thematic analysis of the data. The third chapter presents the key findings, highlighting how chefs implement the standards and the challenges they encounter in practice. The final chapter discusses these findings in relation to the existing literature, then outlines conclusions and recommendations on policy implementation and socioeconomic factors.

Personal interest

I chose this research topic because of my personal and professional interests in children's nutrition and school food provision. My previous experience working in the school food sector provided me with insights into the daily challenges of preparing and serving meals that meet the UK School Food Standards. I became particularly interested in areas such as allergen management, dietary needs, and food hygiene, which are closely linked to my Environmental Health studies. This combination of practical experience and academic focus led me to explore the views of primary school chefs, whose opinions are often overlooked in existing research. My background has helped me better understand the school food environment and communicate effectively with participants to gather valuable insights. Overall, this research

aligns with my broader interest in public health and addressing inequalities in children's diets within schools.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

Children's diets are vital for healthy growth and development. Proper nutrition in childhood provides key nutrients for physical growth, mental function, and overall health, while also helping maintain a healthy weight (British Nutrition Foundation, 2025). Eating habits and food choices are often set early on, so the dietary patterns developed in childhood can continue into adulthood and be hard to break, impacting long-term health.

Schools are a fundamental setting for shaping children's eating habits because much of their daily food intake occurs there. Studies indicate that the food environment around schools, including availability, prices, and marketing, can create obesogenic conditions that affect children's nutrition and health (França et al., 2022). In response to rising concerns about childhood obesity and diet-related illnesses, the UK government implemented the UK school food standards 2014 to ensure children receive nutritious, balanced meals during school hours.

Despite these policy efforts, childhood obesity remains a significant public health concern. The national Child Measurement Programme (NCMP) is an annual, mandated public health initiative in England. It measures the height and weight of children in Reception (aged 4-5) and Year 6 (aged 10-11). In 2023/24, it was found that about 10% of reception-age children were classified as obese, and around 12% were overweight. Among Year 6 children, roughly

22% were obese. Nearly 14% were overweight. (Stiebahl, 2025) These statistics highlight the importance of interventions to promote healthier eating habits.

This literature review is guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasises that children's behaviours are shaped by multiple interacting environmental systems (Alam, 2020). In this study, the ecological systems include family, school, and wider policy contexts. Drawing on this framework, the review will explore childhood obesity as a public health issue, the development of children's dietary behaviours, the role of schools in shaping diets, the evolution of school food policy in the UK, the implementation of the School Food Standards, and the challenges faced by school chefs responsible for delivering these policies in practice. Despite the importance of school food policies, limited research has explored the experiences of those responsible for preparing and implementing these meals, particularly school chefs.

1.2 Childhood obesity and diet in the UK

Rates of childhood overweight and obesity have increased substantially worldwide. By 2022, over 390 million children and adolescents aged 5–19 were overweight, including more than 160 million with obesity, representing a significant rise since 1990 (World Health Organisation, 2025). This global trend highlights the growing importance of addressing childhood diet and nutrition as key public health priorities.

Childhood obesity remains a significant concern in the UK. Data indicate that in 2022, 15% of children aged 2–15 had obesity, while a combined 27% were overweight or obese. Trends over time show that obesity rates increased from 12% in 1995 to a peak of 19% in 2004, then

stabilised between 14% and 17% in recent years. (NHS England, 2024) While this data suggests that the rate of increase has slowed, the continued high prevalence indicates that childhood obesity continues to be a persistent public health concern.

Childhood obesity is associated with various negative physical health outcomes. In the short term, children with obesity may experience metabolic complications such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and liver disease (NHS, 2019), as well as endocrine disorders like thyroid issues and reproductive problems (National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, 2019). Evidence also shows that children who are overweight or obese are more likely to remain obese into adulthood and develop non-communicable diseases, including diabetes and cardiovascular disease, at a younger age (World Health Organisation, 2025a). Beyond physical health risks, obesity can also negatively affect psychological and social well-being. Children living with obesity might face depression, cognitive challenges, and poorer academic results, along with social issues such as bullying, stigma, and social isolation, which can reduce their participation in physical activity (Marcus, Danielsson and Hagman, 2022).

Socioeconomic inequalities are also a significant factor influencing children's diets and obesity risk. Research indicates that healthier diets are often less affordable for lower-income households. For example, the most deprived fifth of the UK population would need to spend around 50% of their disposable income on food to afford the government-recommended healthy diet. Consequently, many families rely on cheaper, lower-nutrition, high-fat, high-salt, high-sugar foods, as well as ultra-processed foods linked to a higher risk of obesity (Chapman and Wentworth, 2024).

These inequalities are closely linked to the social determinants of health. The Marmot review highlights that health inequalities in the UK are strongly influenced by socioeconomic factors such as income, living conditions, and access to healthy food. (Marmot, 2010) As a result, children living in deprived communities may face greater barriers to maintaining a healthy diet, thus increasing their risk of obesity-related conditions.

Empirical research further shows how deprivation can affect children's eating behaviours within a home setting. A study of families with primary school-aged children in London found that higher deprivation was linked to more obesogenic food environments, less organised mealtimes, and greater reliance on non-responsive parental feeding practices. This includes emotional feeding, pressuring a child to eat, restricting food, and using food as a reward (Miller et al., 2020). Children from more deprived households also showed greater food responsiveness and emotional overeating, as well as having a higher body mass index (D. Smith et al., 2025).

These findings align with the principles of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which suggests that children's development and behaviours are shaped by multiple interacting environmental systems. From this perspective, children's dietary behaviours are influenced not only by individual choices but also by family environments and socioeconomic conditions. This emphasises the importance of considering broader environmental influences when addressing childhood obesity and improving children's diets. (Suwannawong et al., 2023)

1.3 Childhood Diet and Lifelong Eating Habits

Various factors can shape children's eating habits, including the home food environment and social influences; school is the primary social setting for children. Parental dietary patterns have the greatest impact, as parents influence their child's perceptions of food and help shape their food preferences and eating behaviours. Encouraging healthy snack choices with some restrictions has been shown to positively affect children's dietary habits (Mahmood et al., 2021).

Children's food preferences begin to form at very early stages in life. Early exposure is essential for acceptance of foods, especially healthy options like vegetables. Along with early exposure, repetition is also important in helping children accept healthy foods (Johnson, 2016).

Social influences also play a key role in shaping children's eating behaviours. Social learning theory proposes that children develop food preferences not only through direct experience with food but also by observing the eating behaviours of others around them. Empirical experimental studies by Leann Birch demonstrated that preschool children often model the eating behaviours and food choices of their peers, indicating that social contexts can influence food acceptance (Birch, 1980). Observational learning from adults has also been shown to affect children's eating behaviours. For example, children are more willing to try unfamiliar foods when they observe a teacher enthusiastically consuming them (Savage, Fisher and Birch, 2007). These findings suggest that both peer and adult modelling can play an important role in encouraging children to try new foods and develop healthier eating habits.

Schools, therefore, represent an important environment that influences and shapes children's dietary behaviours, as they provide a daily context in which food choices are observed and shared among peers and adults. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasises that children's eating behaviours are shaped by multiple interacting environments, including family, school, and wider societal context. These influences collectively contribute to the development of dietary behaviours during childhood that may persist into adolescence and adulthood.

1.4 The Role of Schools in Shaping Children's Diets

Schools play a vital role in shaping children's dietary habits; many pupils have one main meal during the school day. In the UK, school meals are especially important for children from lower-income families, who may depend on them for consistent nutrition. Recent data show that eligibility for free school meals (FSM) has continued to increase, with about 25.7% of pupils, roughly 2.2 million children, being eligible for FSM in 2025, up from 24.6% in 2024. Additionally, on census day 2025, nearly 1.6 million infant pupils were recorded as receiving a free school meal, with nearly 1.3 million accessing their meal through the 'universal infant free school meals policy' rather than standard eligibility criteria (Department for Education, 2025). These figures emphasise how many children rely on school meals and the growing importance of school meal provision as a safety net for children's developing diets, alongside rising socioeconomic inequalities.

Along with providing meals and implementing the FSM programme, the environment in which children eat must be enjoyable. One factor that can help improve children's eating

environment is allocating sufficient time to allow them to eat without feeling rushed. One quantitative experimental study highlighted that children who eat more quickly during school lunch periods may be unable to regulate their food intake, leading to overeating. A public health strategy to support healthier eating behaviours would be to allow adequate time to consume a balanced meal (Zandian et al., 2012). Another observational, mixed-methods study examined the dining room environment in which children consume their lunches and found it was often very busy and noisy, with children sometimes feeling “rushed” and pressured to eat quickly (Moore et al., 2023). Along with Moore et al. (2023), a quantitative intervention study found that improving dining room environments can also lead to improvements in children’s learning and classroom behaviour (Golley et al., 2010).

Since schools play a significant role in shaping children's dietary behaviours, the UK government has introduced policies to improve the nutritional quality of school meals. The key initiative is the UK School Food Standards 2014, which set guidelines for the types of foods that can be served in school settings. These standards are the primary drivers of reducing inequalities and providing nutrition for all primary school children.

1.5 Evolution of School Meals Policy in the UK

The historical context of the development of school meal policies in the UK has evolved over time. Early school meals were provided under the Education (Provision of Meals) Act 1906. This legislation aimed to combat widespread poverty and undernutrition, which were believed to hinder children’s learning. The Education (Provision of Meals) Act 1914 granted authorities the power to provide meals without requiring central government approval. These early

policies recognised the link between nutrition and children's capacity to learn (Gillard, 2024). Later, nutritional standards were introduced under the Education Act 1944. The legislation required local authorities to ensure that milk, meals, and other refreshments were provided for pupils attending schools and county colleges (Gillard, 2019).

The Education Act 1980 changed the responsibilities of local authorities regarding school meals. Under the Act, schools were no longer required to provide school meals to pupils but were still obliged to ensure that free meals were available to children from low-income families (Education Act 1980, 2025). The deregulation of national standards and increased financial pressures on catering services were widely criticised for lowering the nutritional quality of school meals. Without clear regulations, schools and catering providers often prioritised cost efficiency, resulting in a greater dependence on cheaper processed foods and simpler menus (Nixon et al., 2025).

In response to growing concerns about the declining nutritional quality of school meals following the Education Act of 1980, there was an increased public and political focus on this issue during the 2000s. A significant facilitator was led by celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, whose campaign was extensively publicised through the television series 'Jamie's School Dinners'. The program highlighted the poor nutritional standards of many school meals at the time, including the widespread use of processed foods high in salt, fat, and sugar. This campaign also sparked widespread public debate about children's nutrition, ultimately leading to petitions, media headlines, and increased government attention. Consequently, the UK government committed hundreds of millions of pounds to improve school catering services.

Although the campaign led by Jamie Oliver received widespread public support, it also generated considerable backlash and controversy. Media outlets reported that parents and pupils criticised the removal of popular processed foods and expressed dissatisfaction with the new, healthier menus, while kitchen staff highlighted the higher cost of providing healthier meals (Curtis and editor, 2007). Media reports suggested that in some schools the uptake of school meals initially declined following the introduction of healthier options, as some pupils chose to bring packed lunches instead (Boffey, 2011). These responses emphasised the practical and cultural challenges involved in changing children's eating habits within school environments. Despite this resistance, the campaign significantly increased public awareness of the importance of children's nutrition and placed pressure on the government to reform school food provision. As a result, the government introduced a range of initiatives to improve the quality of school meals, including the creation of the School Food Trust to support schools in implementing healthier menus (Dimbleby and Vincent, 2013). These developments ultimately contributed to the introduction of the UK School Food Standards 2014, which set national guidelines for the types of foods that can be served in schools to promote healthier diets among children.

1.6 UK School Food Standards

Following concerns about the nutritional quality of school meals, the UK Government introduced the UK school food standards, designed to regulate the types of food and drink provided in schools. These standards were introduced through the School Food Regulations 2014, which became mandatory in all schools from 2015 (UK Statutory Requirements, 2014).

The standards aim to ensure that food served in schools is nutritious, high-quality, and promotes children's health and well-being. They specify providing a balanced variety of foods, including daily portions of fruit and vegetables, starchy foods such as bread or rice, and dairy products, while limiting foods high in fat, salt, and sugar. For example, deep-fried foods are restricted to no more than two portions per week, and sweets and chocolate are not permitted during the school day. (Department for Education, 2019)

Assessing the implementation of school food standards throughout the UK suggests that these policies have had a positive impact on children's diets. A review published in Public Health Nutrition found that when school food standards were implemented, the nutritional quality of school food improved, leading to better overall diets and nutrient intake among pupils who consumed school lunches. The study also highlighted that improving school food provision and dining environments was associated with higher uptake of school meals and broader health benefits for children across socioeconomic groups (Adamson et al., 2013).

1.7 Challenges Implementing the UK School Food Standards

Although the UK school food standards clearly establish guidelines for all school chefs, many challenges remain, including financial limitations, children's food preferences, time pressures, and gaps in staff knowledge. A systematic review in Public Health Nutrition identified financial pressures, such as the higher cost of healthier ingredients, as a prominent barrier. Other problems include limited availability of compliant foods, inadequate staff training or awareness of policies, and negative attitudes from pupils and stakeholders toward healthier options. Social and environmental factors, including students' preferences and their desire

for unhealthy foods, hinder adherence to policy. These insights underscore that, despite policies such as the UK School Food Standards aimed at improving children's diets, effective implementation depends on sufficient funding, staff support, and community engagement (Ronto et al., 2020).

While previous research has identified several barriers to implementing school food policies, much of this work focuses on policy outcomes rather than the experiences of those responsible for delivering the standards in practice. School chefs play a key role in preparing and providing meals to pupils; however, their perspectives are rarely explored in depth. Therefore, this study aims to explore the challenges faced by school chefs when implementing the UK School Food Standards through qualitative interviews.

1.8 Research Gap

Chefs play a vital role in implementing policy, as they are the key individuals who translate the legislation from theory into practice. They are responsible for menu planning, ordering food supplies, and presenting and serving meals to children. However, there is little knowledge or research on how chefs themselves implement the standards directly. Most research focuses solely on policy outcomes or student behaviour, as highlighted, rather than the experiences of those who prepare the food.

A significant amount of this literature is quantitative and focuses primarily on health outcomes, policy effectiveness, or student behaviour. Example studies mentioned, including Adamson et al. (2013) and Ronto et al. (2020), evaluate the nutritional impact and

implementation barriers of school food policies, while research on dietary behaviour largely examines parental influence, food exposure, and social modelling among children (Birch, 1980; Johnson, 2016; Mahmood et al., 2021). Even though these studies provide valuable insights into the elements shaping children's diets, they rarely explore the perspectives of the individuals responsible for delivering these policies in practice. School chefs and catering staff play a critical role in converting policy into everyday meals through menu planning, food preparation, and interactions with pupils. However, their experiences, challenges, and perceptions remain largely underexplored in the literature. Therefore, qualitative research is needed to gain deeper insight into how school food standards are implemented at the source and to understand the practical barriers faced by school chefs.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 General approach:

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used to investigate Primary School Chefs' Experiences of Implementing the UK School Food Standards. The research involved semi-structured, in-person qualitative interviews with six primary school-level chefs across the Wirral, examining their experiences of interpreting and implementing the UK School Food Standards in their everyday professional practice. The qualitative design enabled an in-depth examination of participants' perspectives and experiences.

2.2 Design and Methodology:

A qualitative approach is regarded as most appropriate for this study, as the aim is to explore experiences, meanings, and interpretations rather than rely on statistics. The focus is on understanding the experiences of primary school chefs as they implement the UK School Food Standards in their daily professional practice. Additionally, qualitative research prioritises participants' voices, enabling detailed descriptions of their experiences. Green and Thorogood (2025) note that a qualitative design facilitates understanding of how food policy is interpreted at the local level and captures the depth, variation, and similarities across participants' experiences.

This study used a semi-structured interview design to collect primary data. This approach was chosen because it allowed flexibility within each interview while remaining consistent in data collection. A prepared set of interview questions guided each participant and helped the

interviewer explore the experiences of primary school chefs in implementing the UK school food standards. While the same core open-ended questions were used in each interview to maintain comparability, this still allowed each participant to elaborate in depth on their own experiences. In total, six primary school chefs working across the Wirral were interviewed, with the option of in-person or Microsoft Teams interviews. This was done purely to accommodate participants' preferences. However, all six primary school chefs chose to participate in face-to-face interviews. Conducting the interviews face-to-face enabled a more natural discussion, thereby enriching the data collected.

2.2 Method:

For this study, semi-structured interviews were considered most appropriate, as they enabled in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and interpretations of the implementation of the UK school food standards while supporting children's diets. Structuring interviews in this way was deemed important, as it prioritised participants' perspectives. The semi-structured approach guided the conversation by key themes while maintaining flexibility, focusing on professionals' everyday practices. The balance of structure and openness was valuable when exploring professionals' experiences.

Green and Thorogood (2005) explain how qualitative interviews are deemed essential for capturing subjective experiences in data collection. Emphasis is placed on preparing a list of topics or questions before conducting semi-structured interviews, with responses guiding the direction and depth of the conversation. This method enables the highlighting of specific topics and the identification of unforeseen ones. It is argued that such an approach is

particularly appropriate for exploring primary school chefs' experiences of implementing the UK school food standards. This approach helps understand the "how" and "why" behind the practice in real-world settings and provides more detailed insights. It is concluded that semi-structured interviewing is considered the most suitable methodological approach for professionals' lived experiences, as supported by Green and Thorogood (2025).

The interview questions were designed to align closely with the research aims: to explore primary school chefs' experiences of implementing the UK School Food Standards, with a focus on how they interpret the guidelines and navigate challenges in supporting children's diets in the Wirral. An interview guide was created in advance, structured around the research aims. The questions were open-ended to encourage detailed responses and allow participants to reflect on their experiences in their own words.

As previously mentioned, and highlighted in the literature review, existing research has also shaped the questions developed for this study. *'School Food Standards in the UK: Implementation and Evaluation'* is a quantitative study that examines how standards are enforced in practice, levels of compliance, and the realities of providing school meals within policy constraints (Adamson et al., 2013). The systematic review by Ronto, R. et al. (2020) identifies enablers and obstacles to implementing school-based healthy food and drink policies. The article by Suwannawong, P.R. et al. (2023) employs Ecological Systems Theory to promote healthy eating environments among school-age children. It also examines how various systems, namely school, family, community, and policy, interact to shape children's dietary choices. This directly relates to the study questions about how chefs support children's diets and influence their eating habits, especially at primary schools.

The interview questions were carefully developed, and a pilot interview was conducted with a classmate to test these questions and practice recording techniques. This initial interview assessed the clarity, relevance, and sequence of the questions. Minor wording adjustments were made, and it was ensured that the questions suggested detailed, reflective responses aligned with the research goals. The process also served as an opportunity to practice recording methods and estimate the interview's duration.

The interviews were conducted in person and recorded via Microsoft Teams, providing a practical and secure method of data collection. Transcriptions were made verbatim to ensure accuracy. Next, all data was anonymised. Schools were labelled by ward rather than by name, maintaining confidentiality while allowing analysis of socioeconomic differences across Wirral. Categorising data by ward enabled exploration of whether factors such as deprivation, budget constraints, and local demographics influenced chefs' experiences with implementing the School Food Standards. This context-aware approach aimed to enrich the analysis and support a more detailed interpretation of the results. Ethical standards were strictly followed in accordance with Liverpool John Moores University's guidelines for qualitative research, including the obtaining of informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation, and explaining participants' right to withdraw.

The interview questions were developed using a combined approach that reviewed the literature, including Adamson (2013), Ronto (2020), and Suwannawong (2023). Themes related to school food policy implementation, such as budget constraints, structural barriers, and contextual influences, were identified in previous research and used to inform the development of the topic areas. In addition to conducting the literature review, it was

considered important to align the questions with the research aims. These aims included exploring the experiences of primary school chefs in implementing the UK School Food Standards, with particular attention to how guidelines are interpreted, and challenges are navigated in supporting children's diets in Wirral. The objectives were to investigate how the standards are interpreted and applied by primary school chefs when planning and preparing meals; to identify key challenges encountered, such as budget limitations, children's food preferences, and logistical constraints like time pressures and meal service logistics; and to explore the strategies used by chefs to balance the nutritional guidelines with the practical demands of primary school children.

A pilot interview was conducted prior to the formal data collection to refine the interview questions. The clarity of the questions was ensured through the pilot, and responses were aligned with the research aims. During this process, minor adjustments were made to the wording to reduce ambiguity and prevent leading phrasing. The flow and duration of the interview were also assessed to ensure sufficient discussion time while maintaining focus on the topic. Although the pilot data were not included in the final analysis, the process enhanced the credibility and transparency of the research design by ensuring that the interview questions were aligned with the study's objectives.

2.3 Sampling Strategy and Recruitment:

This study focused on primary school chefs working across the Wirral. A primary school setting was deliberately selected because children are still in the early stages of shaping and developing their eating habits. This makes the implementation of UK school food standards

significant, as primary school-level school food provision can impact children's long-term dietary behaviours. By focusing on chefs working directly within these environments, the research aimed to explore how those responsible for preparing and delivering meals interpret and enact national food policy and how this affects children's nutritional development.

The Wirral was chosen as the geographical focus due to its socio-economic diversity. A mix of wealthier communities and areas with higher deprivation was featured, providing a varied context for school food delivery. This diversity facilitated the collection of a wide range of experiences and perspectives within a relatively small area. Participants with direct experience implementing the School Food Standards in primary school kitchens were selected using purposive sampling.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a method commonly employed in qualitative research to gather detailed insights from individuals with direct experience of the research topic, in this case, primary school chefs. As detailed in *The Good Research Guide: For Small-Scale Social Research Projects* (Denscombe, 2017), purposive sampling involves the intentional selection of participants who are most likely to provide valuable and relevant information for the study. Instead of aiming for statistical representativeness, this approach emphasises identifying individuals with specific knowledge or experience that can significantly contribute to the research question. Denscombe notes that participants in qualitative studies are described as "information-rich," providing detailed insights into the research topic. In this study, primary school chefs were considered information-rich because they were directly responsible for planning, preparing, and delivering school meals in accordance with the UK School Food Standards.

Elements of convenience sampling were also utilised alongside purposive sampling, as participants were recruited through existing professional networks within the school food sector. Denscombe emphasises that in small-scale research projects, practical access to participants often influences recruitment, making researchers frequently dependent on individuals who are both relevant to the study and reasonably accessible. This combined approach allowed for the recruitment of participants who were both information-rich and realistically available within the study's timeframe (Denscombe, 2017).

Recruitment was carried out through professional networks established during the researcher's prior work in the school food sector. Criteria for participation included current employment as a primary school chef in a primary school within Wirral, Northwest England, involvement in planning, preparing, or serving school meals compliant with the UK School Food Standards, being aged 18 or over, and providing informed consent. Willingness and availability for a 30–45-minute interview, either face-to-face or via Microsoft Teams, were also required. Exclusion criteria included individuals not directly involved in food preparation or menu planning, such as administrative staff, mid-day supervisors, or kitchen porters; staff working in secondary schools, private schools, or non-school catering settings; those under 18; individuals unable to provide informed consent; and anyone refusing audio recording, which was deemed essential for accurate data collection and transcription. Contact with chefs was facilitated by a catering consultancy that collaborates closely with school kitchens across Wirral. This gatekeeper role enabled initial outreach to eligible participants while maintaining professional boundaries and ethical standards.

2.4 Conducting the interviews:

All interviews were conducted between January and February 2026. Participants were given the option to participate via Microsoft Teams or in person, according to their availability. All six participants chose to have face-to-face interviews at their workplaces. At the beginning of each interview, the purpose of the research was reiterated, and consent was obtained both in writing and verbally. Once the discussions started, they typically proceeded in a conversational manner. Although an interview guide provided structure, participants were encouraged to elaborate on topics particularly relevant to their experiences. Many participants shared detailed examples of challenges encountered in balancing nutritional guidelines with children's food preferences, budget constraints, and time pressures during meal service.

The semi-structured approach permitted the interviews to develop naturally, with some participants raising issues not anticipated in the original guide. For example, several chefs discussed the importance of encouraging children to try new foods, and the strategies used to make healthier meals more appealing. These conversations provided valuable insights into how the School Food Standards are interpreted and implemented in daily practice.

At the conclusion of each interview, participants were given the chance to share any additional comments or reflections on their experiences. Field notes were taken during and immediately after each session to record contextual observations and initial reflections, including notable themes, participant emphasis on specific issues, and the overall tone of the discussion. These notes aided in subsequent familiarisation during the thematic analysis.

2.5 Data Analysis:

The data were transcribed and categorised by Ward, and the data were put into tables to visualise each Ward and its deprivation percentage. This was to help put the socio-economic state of each school into context. The data was then analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. The first phase involved familiarisation with the data; in this study, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and read multiple times to ensure understanding. Additionally, initial impressions were recorded, revealing recurring references to budget pressures, children's food preferences, and perceived professional responsibility, which were consistently reported across participants' interviews.

The second part of the phase involved data coding, which was carried out manually by highlighting relevant text segments related to the research aims. Specifically, emphasis was placed on primary school chefs' experiences with implementing the UK School Food Standards, focusing on their interpretation of the guidelines and the management of challenges in supporting children's diets in the Wirral. This process included semantic highlighting of issues such as budget constraints and time pressures, as well as latent themes, including underlying assumptions about responsibilities, policy interpretation, and children's eating habits. Similarly, by combining semantic and latent analysis, this coding approach enabled both descriptive and interpretive examination of the data.

The third phase of data analysis, as described by Braun and Clark, involves organising previously identified codes into potential themes and recognising patterns among them.

Codes such as financial constraints, food costs, and staffing shortages are categorised under the theme 'structural barriers. Likewise, discussions regarding children's food preferences and resistance to healthier options are grouped into a theme reflecting 'tensions between policy standards and pupil choice'. The fourth phase is dedicated to ensuring coherence with the study's aims and objectives, which involves differentiating, refining, and discarding some emerging themes to maintain clarity.

The fifth phase involved naming themes, with each theme clearly identified in relation to the research aims to ensure it was organised into concepts rather than merely summarising the data. The final phase of Braun and Clark's thematic analysis consisted of writing a report that supported each theme with illustrative quotations from the qualitative interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

2.6 Authenticity, Transparency and Minimising Bias:

Authenticity was ensured by prioritising participants' voices and accurately presenting their experiences, reflecting their perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were considered the most suitable approach because they did not limit respondents to a predefined set of response categories. During the thematic analysis, the identified themes were supported by verbatim quotes from participants to prevent personal interpretation.

Transparency was preserved by clearly outlining each stage of the research process, including the sampling strategy, interview design, data collection, transcription, and thematic analysis

following Braun and Clark's approach. This detailed account enables an understanding of how findings and conclusions were reached.

Potential bias in the interviews was also addressed. Since the implementation of the UK School Food Standards was the focus of the research, some participants might have initially perceived the interview as an assessment of their compliance. This perception could have influenced their responses, leading to a more positive portrayal of their practices. To mitigate this, the study's purpose was clearly explained at the beginning of each interview, emphasising that it aimed to understand chefs' experiences rather than to evaluate their performance or compliance. Participants were reassured that responses would remain anonymous and that no specific schools or staff members would be identified. The conversational style of the semi-structured interviews was used to create a relaxed environment that encouraged the open sharing of both challenges and positives.

2.7 Ethics and consent:

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study in accordance with Liverpool John Moores University's guidelines for qualitative research. An information sheet detailing the study, participants' rights, and the voluntary nature of participation was provided to all primary school chefs prior to their involvement. Informed consent was secured, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any time without repercussions. To protect confidentiality, identifying details were omitted, and pseudonyms were assigned. Schools were classified by ward rather than by name, facilitating the analysis of socio-economic factors influencing chefs' implementation of UK School Food Standards while preserving anonymity. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely on password-protected devices. These

measures ensured adherence to ethical standards and supported the development of findings.

Ethical considerations were given considerable importance in this study, especially given the researcher's professional experience in the school food sector. Previous work in some primary school kitchens and existing professional networks helped establish connections with participants. To ensure fairness and minimise bias, participants were carefully chosen from schools where the researcher had no prior employment, thereby maintaining objectivity and trustworthiness in data collection.

Chapter 3: Findings

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from semi-structured interviews with six primary school chefs responsible for implementing the UK School Food Standards. The analysis explored their experiences of implementing the standards and the challenges they faced in supporting children’s diets in school settings. Each theme is introduced in turn, supported by illustrative quotations from participants (P1–P6). Four key themes emerged from the data: theme 1, interpreting and applying the school food standards; theme 2, children’s food preferences as a barrier; theme 3, operational and resource constraints; and theme 4, going beyond the standards through care and responsibility, as highlighted in Figure 1. Additionally, the socioeconomic context of each school is considered, as shown in Figure 2, as levels of neighbourhood deprivation were found to influence several aspects of the chefs’ experiences, including children’s attitudes towards food, available budgets, and staffing capacity.

Figure 1: Diagram exploring the 4 themes

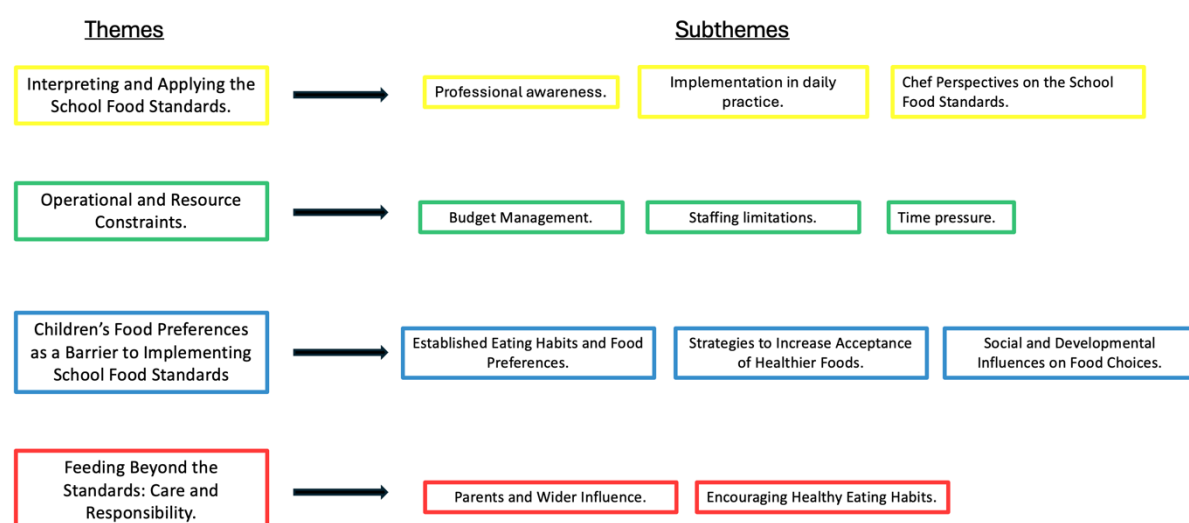


Table 1: This Table Provides participant information and socioeconomic background.

Participant	Ward	Deprivation percentile	IMD Decile	Socioeconomic Context
P1	Seacombe	5%	1	Most Deprived.
P2	Liscard	16%	2	Most deprived.
P3	Birkenhead & Tranmere	19%	2	Most Deprived.
P4	Birkenhead & Tranmere	19%	2	Most Deprived
P5	Pensby & Thingwall	49%	5	Average
P6	Greasby, Frankby & Irby.	94%	10	Least deprived

The demographic background for each primary school is presented in Table 1, including the ward in which their school is located and the associated neighbourhood deprivation level. The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) Decile and Socioeconomic context were determined using the English Indices of Deprivation 2025, which ranks neighbourhoods across England by deprivation and classifies them into deciles from 1 to 10, with 1 being the most deprived and 10 the least. The IMD Decile indicates the relative level of deprivation of each neighbourhood compared to others nationally. According to Table 1, most participants (P1–P4) are employed in schools in highly deprived areas, whereas participant 5 is employed at a school in an area of average deprivation. Participant 6 works in a school located in one of the least deprived areas. This variation in socioeconomic context provides important background for understanding the experiences of chefs implementing the school food standards across different school environments.

3.2 Theme 1: Interpreting and Applying the School Food Standards.

At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked how the UK School Food Standards influence their day-to-day decisions regarding ingredients, recipes, and portion sizes. This included an opening question that referenced specific aspects of the standards, helping ease participants into the discussion and prompting them to reflect on how the standards shape their daily practices. Participants described the many parts of the standards they follow and how the standards serve as a framework for everyday decision-making in the kitchen.

Professional awareness:

Participants demonstrated a strong awareness of the standards, particularly regarding food safety, allergens, and ingredient monitoring. Several chefs emphasised the importance of checking ingredients and ensuring that all food served to pupils is safe and suitable for different dietary needs.

Participant 1 highlighted the importance of monitoring allergens and checking ingredients on delivery:

“Regarding allergens, ingredients and contents, they’ve got to be listed. We check them when the delivery comes in” (P1)

Similarly, Participant 3 described how the standards guide daily decisions related to food preparation and menu planning:

“UK food standards guide my daily choices around ingredients, recipes and portion size to ensure food is safe, balanced and suitable for different dietary needs.” (P3)

Food hygiene and allergen management were also identified as some of the most straightforward aspects of the standards to follow Participant 3 explained:

“The easiest part of the standards for me to follow is food hygiene and allergen controls. Clear rules about hand washing, cleaning, food storage, temperature checks and preventing cross-contamination.”(P3)

Other participants also noted the routine nature of these practices in their daily work. For example, Participant 4 stated that they are *“used to going off the guidelines,”(P4)* while Participant 6 emphasised that *“we must always check ingredients.”(P6)*

Implementation in daily practice:

Participants also described how the standards influence the preparation and service of food in the school setting. Many chefs explained that they follow the standards by limiting processed foods and ensuring that meals are freshly prepared where possible.

For example, Participant 1 detailed:

“We cook from scratch, so we don’t use a lot of processed foods.”(P1)

Comparably, Participant 2 explained that they follow restrictions on processed foods within weekly menus:

“We follow the guidelines as best we can, and we make sure that we only have one processed food a week on our hot meals. Like a burger one week and sausages the next.”(P2)

Some participants also discussed adapting meals to meet pupils’ cultural and religious needs.

Participant 4 noted:

“We have to use different recipes and ingredients for different religions.”(P4)

Menu planning and portion control were also influenced by the standards. Participant 6 explained how certain foods are limited throughout the week:

“We were only allowed to have chips once a week. We only have two proteins on the deli; we don’t do red meat much in a week. We do beef one week, chicken the next week, for the roast.”(P6)

Chefs’ perspectives on the school Food Standards:

When participants were asked whether the UK School Food Standards help or hinder their ability to support children's diets, most expressed positive views and felt that the standards play an important role in promoting healthier eating habits among pupils.

Participant 1 emphasised the responsibility associated with preparing food for children:

“Obviously, the standards are very important because you are serving food to children. If it’s the wrong ingredient, it can be harmful to the child.”(P1)

Similarly, Participant 2 suggested that the standards help prevent unhealthy food choices from directing school menus:

“I think they help because it would be easy ... to just give children what they want, like chicken nuggets and chips.”(P2)

Participants also highlighted how the standards encourage children to try more balanced meals. Participant 3 explained:

“Yes, the meals I prep can help children develop healthy eating habits by introducing them to nutritious foods and balanced versions.”(P3)

Participant 4 shared a similar view, suggesting that the structured menus encourage pupils to try foods they might not otherwise choose:

“Nutrition, I say, actually helps because if it were down to the kids to choose every day, it would just be hot dogs, burgers, everything... They’re actually trying foods that they wouldn’t necessarily try if they weren’t here.”(P4)

3.3 Theme 2: Operational and Resource Constraints.

During the interview, a recurring theme emerged regarding budget management staffing limitations, and time pressures in meal preparation and service. These operational and resource constraints significantly impacted the process of preparing and serving food to children and the ability to ensure adherence to UK school food standards. A noticeable difference was observed between chefs working in schools in more affluent areas and those in lower-income areas. Chefs in more affluent areas often faced the challenge of receiving less government funding, as fewer pupils qualified for free school meals.

Budget management:

Participant 5, situated with an IMD Decile of 5, highlighted how cooking meals from scratch can help manage a limited budget:

“If you cook from scratch, it's cheaper anyway, so that enables you to kind of stick to the budget just a bit easier than if you were to buy ready prepared stuff... It's more work, but it's cost-effective. I always keep in mind the budget when planning meals and keep it down where I can.” (P5)

Participant 5 also noted that the schools' locations influenced funding availability.

“It's a bit more of a wealthy area here, so I don't have funding for loads of free school meals.” (P5)

These responses illustrate how school funding structures can create financial pressures for kitchen staff in more affluent areas. As a result, chefs may rely on cost-saving strategies, such as preparing meals from scratch, to remain within budget while still meeting required nutritional standards.

Similarly, Participant 6, who is based in a more affluent area with an IMD decile of 10, also highlighted that budget management is a key factor in meal preparation.

“I always shop around, always look out for deals and see where I can save money and keep to budget.” (P6)

Both participants highlighted that preparing meals that comply with UK school food standards while staying within budget often demands extra effort and careful planning.

In contrast, participants working in schools located in more deprived areas reported slightly different experiences. Participant 1, whose school is situated in IMD decile 1, suggested that budget constraints did not significantly affect their ability to provide meals:

“No, they don’t, we’re set on budget and have set menus, so we know every week what we’re cooking.” (P1)

Equally, Participant 4, who works in a school within a more deprived area, also indicated that financial constraints were not currently a significant concern:

“Plate cost and budget are not an issue for us at the moment.” (P4)

However, despite schools in deprived areas receiving additional funding through free school meal provision, some participants questioned whether the allocated funding is sufficient to consistently provide nutritionally balanced meals that meet national standards.

Participant 2 explained the challenges of preparing meals within the government funding allocation:

“It's really, really hard on the one hand, £1.05 that the government give for free school meals to actually provide a nutritional meal within that.” (P2)

Participant 2 further explained that limited funding can restrict the variety of food that can be offered to pupils:

“If we had a little more, maybe we could encourage children more and give them a more varied menu.” (P2)

These responses suggest that although schools in more deprived areas may receive additional financial support through free school meal provision, the per-meal funding allocation may still pose challenges when providing varied, nutritionally balanced meals.

Staffing limitations:

Participants consistently raised concerns about staffing shortages during mealtimes. While preparing meals for large numbers of pupils requires a significant kitchen staff, several participants emphasised that staffing issues were particularly noticeable in the dining hall, where supervision and encouragement play an important role in supporting children's eating behaviours. Limited staff presence in dining areas was reported; therefore, no encouragement was given to children to try new foods or finish their meals.

Participant 2 explained that insufficient supervision during lunchtime made it difficult to support children while they were eating:

"Lack of staff in the dining hall, there is no one there to encourage the children to eat. And it's difficult for us to do it as we are behind the counter serving." (P2)

Likewise, Participant 4 emphasised the importance of additional staff present in the dining hall to help promote children's willingness to try unfamiliar foods:

"More staffing in the hall around mealtimes to try and encourage them to taste." (P4)

These responses suggest that staffing challenges extend beyond food preparation to include the support and supervision provided to pupils during mealtimes. Without sufficient staff in dining areas, opportunities to encourage children to try new foods or finish their meals may be limited.

Staffing shortages were also reported to influence food preparation practices within the kitchen. Participant 5 described how limited staff availability sometimes requires adjustments to menu preparation to manage workload:

“Staffing affects us... I've been buying ready-made drinks cartons, which don't take up as much time. It's obviously more costly, but we're not paying for a member of staff. We're spending money on the food.” (P5)

This response highlights how staffing constraints can shape decision-making in school kitchens. In this case, purchasing ready-made items reduces preparation time and eases pressure on staff, even though it may increase food costs.

Time pressure:

Time management was also discussed as an important factor influencing kitchen operations. Some participants described how effective planning, and organisation can reduce time pressures during meal service.

Participant 1 explained that changes in preparation practices helped improve efficiency within the kitchen:

“When I first started here, they weren't doing much prep the day before... it was all rush, rush, rush to get food out on time... I said there are certain things you can do the day before... so now there is no real pressure to get the food out on time... It's just about organising your work and planning.” (P1)

Also, Participant 2 emphasised the significance of teamwork and task distribution in managing time efficiently.

“You have to manage your time well. I have a really good team behind me, so we all have our own jobs, and we all swap as well, so most of the team can cook.” (P2)

These responses indicate that although time pressures are present in school kitchens, good organisation, preparation, and teamwork can help staff manage the demands of meal preparation and service.

3.4 Theme 3: Children's Food Preferences as a Barrier to Implementing School Food Standards.

Participants frequently identified children’s food preferences and reluctance to try unfamiliar foods as a challenge when implementing the UK School Food Standards. Several chefs explained that children often arrive at school with established eating habits, which can make it difficult to encourage them to choose healthier options provided in school meals. As a result, chefs described adopting an encouragement-based approach to motivate children to try new foods.

Established Eating Habits and Food Preferences:

Many participants explained that children arrive at school with pre-existing food preferences that can make it difficult to introduce new or healthier foods. These preferences were often described as being strongly influenced by children’s eating habits at home.

Participant 2 described how some children consistently choose the same foods and are reluctant to try alternatives:

“They can be very picky. It’s quite difficult. You will get a child that only has a ham wrap every single day, they won’t try anything else. It’s really quite difficult and we try to encourage them.”

(P2)

Participant 2 also suggested that eating habits developed at home can shape children’s food choices at school:

“The eating habits that children have got from home are actually quite hard to break.” (P2)

Participant 4 highlighted that children’s home environments can influence their eating habits.

“The hardest challenge is getting children to accept change because obviously they’re allowed whatever they want whenever they want at home.” (P4)

These responses from multiple sources indicate that children’s established eating habits may pose a barrier to chefs' efforts to introduce a wider variety of healthier foods in accordance with the School Food Standards.

Strategies to Increase Acceptance of Healthier Foods:

Participants also described several practical strategies used within school kitchens to increase children's acceptance of healthier meals. One common approach was to present food in visually appealing ways to attract children's interest.

Participant 4 explained:

"The more colour we use, the more willing they are to try." (P4)

Participant 5 described using visual prompts to encourage children to eat a variety of foods:

"I printed off a poster that says, 'Eat the rainbow,' and I say you have to have something with a different colour." (P5)

Other participants described incorporating vegetables into meals in less visible ways to prevent children from rejecting them. Participant 1 explained:

"I'm being a bit crafty... what I do now is I put vegetables in the Bolognese... and not one complaint. If I did it separately, they would say, 'I don't want that miss.'" (P1)

Participant 2 described a similar strategy:

"When I'm making Bolognese, I make sure I put carrots and celery, things like that, in and blend it down so they don't see them." (P2)

Another strategy involved repeated exposure, where vegetables are placed on children's plates even if they initially refuse them. Participant 2 stated:

"We just put vegetables on the plate unless a child says no... they're never going to try them if they're not on their plate, and if they're hungry, they will eat them." (P2)

These strategies demonstrate how chefs actively adapt food preparation and presentation methods to increase the likelihood that children will engage with healthier foods.

Participants also viewed encouragement and support as important strategies to motivate children to try unfamiliar foods. Both kitchen staff and lunchtime supervisors were reported to support children during mealtimes.

Participant 1 explained how they gently encourage children to try new foods:

"We have quite a few children that say 'I don't want this miss', and I'll try and encourage them by saying 'have you tried this before? ... have a little try... if I put a little bit on the side of your plate, will you please try it for me.'" (P1)

Participant 1 also described how lunchtime supervisors reinforce this encouragement:

"If a child, for example, has one bite of something, the midday staff will say, 'Can you go back, sit down and try a little bit more?'" (P1)

These responses suggest that verbal encouragement and positive reinforcement may help increase children's willingness to taste unfamiliar foods.

Social and Developmental Influences on Food Choices:

Participants also suggested that children's willingness to try new foods can be influenced by their age, level of understanding, and peer groups.

Participant 3 explained that older children often feel more comfortable trying unfamiliar foods once they understand they are not required to eat something they dislike:

"Year 5 and 6 understand that if they try it and don't like it, they don't have to eat it. The Year 3-4 gap is hard because they don't trust you. They think if you give them food to try, they have to eat it." (P3)

Peer influence was also identified as a factor affecting children's choices. Participant 4 explained that children often follow the behaviour of their friends during mealtimes:

"We also find that if it's a group of friends, they all follow suit. They all have the same thing, even if they don't like it, they follow what their friends are doing." (P4)

These findings highlight how social dynamics and developmental understanding may influence children's engagement with school meals.

Overall, these findings show that children's established eating habits and food preferences from home can be a significant obstacle to introducing healthier foods at school. However,

cooks and teachers work hard to overcome this by using strategies such as appealing food presentation, repeated tastings, and positive encouragement to help children accept new foods. Additionally, kids' food choices are shaped by their social surroundings, with peer behaviour and understanding playing a role in how they engage with school meals and their openness to trying them.

3.5 Theme 4: Feeding Beyond the Standards: Care and Responsibility

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was the sense of care and responsibility chefs feel towards supporting children's diets beyond the basic requirements of the UK School Food Standards. Participants described taking additional steps to encourage healthier eating behaviours and ensure that children engage with the meals provided. Many chefs highlighted their role in influencing children's food choices, particularly when healthy eating habits may not be strongly reinforced at home.

Encouraging Healthy Eating Habits:

Participants also described actively encouraging children to develop healthier eating habits. In many cases, chefs viewed themselves as playing an important role in shaping children's attitudes towards food, particularly when healthy eating behaviours may not be reinforced elsewhere.

Participant 2 explained that school staff often act as a positive influence on children's eating habits:

“They're not necessarily getting a good influence at home; we have to be the influence.” (P2)

Participants also recognised the importance of children eating the food provided. Participant 1 explained that menu planning often involves listening to children’s feedback:

“I try to listen to feedback from the kids because at the end of the day, they’re the ones that eat it... You're putting something on the menu that looks nice ... but if the children aren’t going to eat it, is it still going to be nutritious?” (P1)

In addition to listening to feedback, participants also described strategies used to increase children's willingness to engage with healthier foods. One approach explained by participant 5 involved repeatedly exposing children to healthier options, even if those foods were not initially consumed.

“Even if it goes in the bin, the fact that it's going on their plate means that they are willing to try.” (P5)

These responses suggest that chefs aim to balance nutritional guidelines with children's preferences while also encouraging gradual changes in eating behaviours.

Influence of Parents and the Home Environment:

Participants also identified parental influence and the home environment as factors that can affect children’s engagement with school meals. Some chefs suggested that parents may not

always fully understand the procedures and standards that school kitchens must follow, as explained by participant 1:

“Parents can be a bit awkward at times because they don’t know the procedures and standards we have to follow... sometimes parents, unfortunately, don’t understand the constraints we are under.” (P1)

Similarly, Participant 2 highlighted that packed lunches brought from home can sometimes conflict with the healthy eating messages promoted in schools:

“We try to put things in place, and then the children and parents complain... a lot of parents send packed lunches in, and it’s full of crisps, cakes and biscuits... and then other children see... it can be difficult.” (P2)

Participant 3 suggested that stronger collaboration between schools and parents could help support healthier eating habits among children:

“I think if parents step in with us... the kids will be healthier.” (P3)

Participant 5 also described the challenges that arise when children arrive at school with established food preferences shaped by their home environment:

“Some of the parents have children that will only eat rubbish, and it’s very difficult to run up against it... I don’t really have a choice in swaying the children’s decision in trying healthier options.” (P5)

These responses highlight how parental influence and home eating environments can shape children's food preferences and attitudes towards school meals.

3.6 Conclusion:

This study shows that implementing the UK School Food Standards involves more than simply following guidelines or legislation. Participants openly report various challenges in preparing and serving nutritious meals for primary school children. Despite differences between more affluent and deprived schools, encouraging children to accept healthier food choices remains a common challenge. Chefs emphasise the need to balance nutritional standards with children's preferences. They also highlight the importance of early dietary influences, with family members and carers playing key roles in shaping children's attitudes towards food before they start school. Overall, the findings demonstrate that school chefs are crucial not only in meeting the Food Standards but also in supporting children's dietary habits, promoting healthier eating behaviours in schools, and helping children develop lasting habits that extend beyond school.

Chapter 4 Discussion, Conclusion & Recommendations

4.1 Introduction to Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore school chefs' experiences in implementing the UK school food standards, focusing on how they interpreted guidelines and navigated challenges in supporting children's diets. This study concentrated on the northwest of England, specifically the Wirral, due to its evident socioeconomic disparities. The area was carefully chosen for an in-depth qualitative review of how the UK school food standards were applied in practice, moving from theory to real-world implementation. The study examined six primary school chefs through semi-structured interviews to enable a rich interpretation of how each chef implemented the UK school food standards. As previously mentioned, there was a gap in the literature, and this qualitative design offered a new perspective and deeper insight into the practical constraints the standards might have imposed and the limitations of implementing them.

Several key themes this study examined were the interpretation and application of the standards, operational and resource constraints, children's preferences, and the chef's moral responsibility to care for children's diets beyond government-set standards. These themes became apparent throughout interviews with all six participants; some were expected, such as the interpretation and application of the UK school food standards, while others were not, such as the need for chefs to provide additional encouragement to children to vary their diets.

This discussion will compare the study's findings with existing literature, exploring how they align with or expand existing understanding of school food policy implementation. It will also reflect on the broader impact of these findings on the effectiveness of school meal programmes, particularly in everyday practice, and on addressing socioeconomic inequalities and the challenges faced by school chefs. In doing so, the discussion seeks to honestly assess how well the UK school food standards are implemented and how effectively they meet children's dietary needs.

4.2 Understanding the implementation of standards

Throughout the interviews, chefs demonstrated a strong awareness of the UK school food standards, including portion control, the use of fresh ingredients, and the restriction of foods high in salt, fat, and sugar when preparing meals for children. Broader areas such as food safety and allergen control were also considered when asked about the UK school food standards. This reflects how primary school chefs view the UK school food standards as equivalent to other food legislation enforced by the Food Standards Agency.

Building on this awareness, the findings also indicate that these standards are actively embedded within daily kitchen practices. Chefs described using the standards as a framework to guide daily decisions, suggesting that policy is translated into practice rather than remaining a theoretical legal requirement. This aligns with the finding previously mentioned in Adamson et al. (2013), a study that analysed and synthesised findings from multiple other studies, which reported that the implementation of school food standards led to vast improvements in the nutritional quality of school meals. This indicates that the UK school food

standards are effectively integrated into school food provision. Having the qualitative interviews directly ask chefs about their awareness of the UK school food standards and whether they help in daily practice helps to solidify the fact that UK school food standards support chefs in delivering balanced meals and meeting children's dietary needs.

4.3 Identifying challenges

The findings identified several key challenges affecting the implementation of the UK school food standards, with budget constraints emerging as a significant factor. Interestingly, this challenge seemed to vary depending on the school's socioeconomic context. Chefs working at schools in more affluent areas reported greater financial pressure to manage budgets carefully because fewer children were eligible for free school meals. In contrast, chefs in more deprived areas reported fewer budgetary concerns, suggesting that higher levels of funding through free school meal provision may help offset financial constraints.

These findings offer a more nuanced perspective on existing research. An example of this is Ronto et al. (2020), who conducted a systematic review examining barriers to implementing school food policies and identified financial limitations, resource constraints, and lack of support as consistent challenges across school settings. The review synthesised evidence from multiple studies and concluded that cost pressures often restrict schools' ability to provide healthier food options and fully comply with policy standards. However, the findings in Ronto et al. also align with those from the qualitative interviews conducted in this study, suggesting that financial barriers are not universal and can be influenced by funding structures linked to deprivation and by free school meals programmes.

These findings reflect the wider socioeconomic inequalities discussed in the literature, particularly by Marmot (2010) and Chapman and Wentworth (2024), who highlight that people in more deprived areas often have less access to resources such as healthy food. Interestingly, in this study, schools in poorer regions appeared to face fewer financial difficulties due to additional funding from free school meal programs. This suggests that such funding can help reduce some of the inequalities associated with deprivation, allowing chefs to better meet school food standards.

Alongside financial constraints, staffing limitations also affected chefs' capacity to promote children's healthy eating habits. While most kitchens met the technical requirements of the standards, several participants noted that shortages were more noticeable in the dining halls, which reduced opportunities to encourage children to choose healthier food options. This suggests that chefs also play a central role in preparing nutritious meals; their influence over children's actual consumption may be limited by factors beyond the kitchen environment.

This finding resonates with research that emphasises the significance of the dining environment. Moor et al. (2023) conducted a mixed-methods observational study, blending quantitative observations with qualitative insights, and found that school dining halls are often crowded, noisy, and feel rushed. These conditions can negatively impact children's eating behaviours. However, while Moore et al. primarily examined environmental factors, this study adds to that understanding by underscoring the important role staff presence plays in shaping children's eating experiences.

The importance of social influence is further highlighted by research into children's eating habits. Studies such as Mahmood et al. (2021) and Birch (1980) demonstrate that encouragement, modelling, and social interaction play key roles in shaping children's food preferences. In a school setting, greater staff involvement during mealtimes could create similar opportunities for positive influence and support, helping to foster healthier eating habits.

Overall, these findings show that successfully implementing school food standards involves more than just food preparation; it is shaped by broader structural and environmental factors such as funding models and staffing capacity. This highlights the need for a more holistic approach to policy implementation, considering both kitchen practices and the wider school environment in influencing children's dietary habits.

4.4 Supporting children's diets

The findings show that school chefs see the UK school food standards as a helpful tool in promoting children's nutrition. Participants consistently emphasised that the standards offer clear, structured guidance, allowing them to prepare meals that are both safe and nutritious. This indicates that the standards are not just seen as regulations but also as a practical framework that supports reliable, health-conscious meal planning in schools.

In addition to ensuring nutritional quality, the findings suggest that school meal provision helps shape children's eating habits. Chefs shared how the structured nature of school meals introduces children to a wider variety of foods, encouraging them to try options they might

not usually choose outside of school. This shows how school environments can positively influence dietary behaviours through repeated exposure and a supportive food setting.

These findings are consistent with earlier research on the effects of School Food Standards. For example, a review in *Public Health Nutrition* indicated that implementing these standards improved the nutritional value of school meals and improved dietary intake among students who ate school lunches (Adamson et al., 2013). Therefore, this study further confirms that structured school food policies can significantly promote healthier eating habits in schools. While previous research mainly examined the nutritional benefits, these findings also offer new perspectives on how chefs perceive the standards as a practical tool for encouraging better dietary choices among children.

Although the UK school food standards were widely accepted by participants, several barriers to their effective implementation were also identified. Children's existing food preferences and limited encouragement of healthy eating at home were highlighted as challenges in promoting healthier diets in schools. These findings relate to the findings chapter, Theme 3: Children's Food Preferences as a Barrier to Implementing School Food Standards, and Theme 4: Feeding Beyond the Standards, Care and Responsibility, both of which highlight the importance of support beyond the school environment in shaping children's dietary behaviours.

Participants frequently referred to the influence of the home environment and parental attitudes towards food. These responses suggest that chefs often feel responsible for encouraging healthier eating behaviours within the school setting, particularly when children

may not receive the same level of encouragement at home. Participant 3 also emphasised the potential advantages of increased collaboration between schools and families. “I think if parents step in with us... the kids will be healthier.” (P3)

Research has shown how the home environment affects children’s eating habits. Miller et al. (2020) found that families facing greater deprivation tend to have more unhealthy food options and less structured mealtimes. Similarly, Smith et al. (2025) discovered that children from lower-income homes are more likely to engage in emotional overeating and often have higher BMI scores. These findings highlight the way socioeconomic factors shape both the availability of food and children’s relationships with eating. In the current study, chefs mentioned that while they can prepare nutritious, balanced meals, their ability to influence children’s eating behaviours is quite limited. This suggests that children’s eating habits are shaped not only at school but also by the routines and patterns established at home.

Previous public initiatives have tried to address these issues. For example, campaigns led by Jamie Oliver, such as Jamie’s School Dinners, raised awareness of the quality of school meals and sparked national conversations about children’s diets. However, reactions were mixed. Some parents and students resisted removing familiar, less healthy options, which in some cases led to fewer children participating in school meals as they opted for packed lunches. Media reports, including articles by Boffey (2011) and Curtis (2007), highlighted the diverse reactions from parents and students, such as dissatisfaction with menu changes and a decline in meal participation. These stories provide a window into public opinion, showing social and cultural resistance to changes in children’s diets. This response highlights that improving children’s diets isn’t just about policy changes it also involves understanding and

addressing their cultural preferences, habits, and attitudes toward food. While initiatives like *Jamie's School Dinners* have played a valuable role in raising awareness, lasting improvements in children's eating habits will likely depend on ongoing collaboration between schools, families, and communities.

Overall, the findings of this study address the three objectives outlined at the start of the research. The first objective aimed to investigate how primary school chefs interpret and apply the UK School Food Standards. The findings demonstrate that primary school chefs retain a strong awareness of the standards and frequently use them as a framework for menu planning, ingredient selection, and portion control.

The second objective was to identify key challenges faced when implementing the standards. The interviews revealed that operational constraints, such as budget limitations, staffing shortages, and the structure of the dining environment, can affect the effectiveness with which the standards are applied in practice.

Finally, the third objective explored how chefs balance nutritional guidelines with the practical realities of working in primary school settings. The findings suggest that chefs often go beyond the formal requirements of the standards by encouraging children to try new foods and develop healthier eating habits. However, the effectiveness of these efforts may depend on wider factors such as parental support and children's established food preferences.

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing qualitative insights into the experiences of primary school chefs, an area that has received limited prior research. By

exploring the practical realities of implementing the UK School Food Standards, this research highlights how operational constraints and social factors shape policy effectiveness in real-world settings.

4.5 Evaluation of the Research Findings

The use of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to provide detailed insights into their experiences, which has received little exploration in existing research. This also strengthens the credibility of the research findings. Additionally, the use of thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006), ensures that themes are systematically identified from the collected data. However, this study involved only six participants in the small area of Wirral; the findings would be more impactful with a larger sample size. Furthermore, the research revealed that socio-economic disparities also play a role, and selecting schools from different wards at various levels of deprivation could yield richer results.

Using self-reported data collected through interviews can sometimes lead to response bias, as participants may portray their practices more positively or provide answers they believe are socially acceptable or expected by the researcher, rather than honestly reflecting their daily routines. This concern is particularly relevant in this study because chefs may feel a professional obligation to show compliance with the UK school food standards. Consequently, the study's results might not fully reflect the real-world complexities and inconsistencies involved in applying these standards.

If this study were conducted again, it might be helpful to include a mixed-methods approach, such as observing in school kitchens or dining halls, to better understand how school food standards are implemented more broadly. Although this study fulfils its purpose of exploring primary school chefs' experiences through the feedback provided, it would have been beneficial to examine a few more angles and perspectives from the many stakeholders involved in school meal provision.

Overall, the findings of this study largely align with existing research suggesting that school food standards improve the nutritional quality of meals provided within schools. Yet, this study offers additional insight into the everyday challenges chefs face when implementing these standards in practice.

4.6 Reflections on the Research

Conducting qualitative interviews emphasised the importance of building rapport with participants to foster open and honest responses. The process of transcribing and coding the interviews also demonstrated how thematic analysis can uncover patterns within qualitative data that might not be immediately apparent.

The findings also raise several questions for future research. Specifically, additional studies could investigate how staffing levels in dining halls affect children's eating behaviours or examine the role of parental engagement in supporting the effectiveness of school food standards. Additionally, it could be valuable to explore how chefs, teachers, and parents can collaborate to support children's nutrition.

4.7 conclusion

This study aimed to explore primary school chefs' experiences of implementing the UK school food standards and the challenges they face in supporting children's diets. Overall, the findings suggest that primary school chefs possess a strong understanding of the standards and view them as an important framework for menu planning and ensuring children receive nutritionally balanced meals. However, the study also identified several practical challenges that affect the effectiveness with which the standards can be implemented. These include financial constraints for schools in more affluent areas, staffing shortages in dining halls to encourage children to eat what's on their plates, and children's existing food preferences shaped at home.

One notable finding was that schools located in more affluent areas sometimes face greater financial pressures due to lower levels of free school meal funding. This highlights how funding structures may indirectly influence the implementation of the UK school food standards. The findings in this study also emphasised the importance of influences beyond the school environment, particularly parental support and children established dietary habits. Overall, the study suggests that while UK school food standards provide an important policy framework for improving children's nutrition, their effectiveness may depend on broader support systems within schools, families, and communities.

4.8 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to support the more effective implementation of the UK school food standards within primary schools. First,

increasing staff presence in the dining halls during meal service would provide greater opportunities for encouragement and interaction with children during mealtimes. As several participating chefs highlighted, they cannot directly encourage pupils because of their role in serving food. Therefore, having dining room staff could support children in trying healthier foods and developing their eating behaviours.

Secondly, increased collaboration between schools and parents may help strengthen healthy eating habits at both school and home. Participants observed that children's existing food preferences and limited support at home sometimes hinder efforts to promote healthy eating within schools. Schools could therefore communicate more clearly with parents about school food standards, including the nutritional goals that wider government aims to achieve, raise awareness of childhood obesity, and emphasise that young children's developing food preferences are important in shaping their diet in adulthood. Practical strategies could include regular newsletters, opportunities for kitchen staff and chefs to attend parent meetings to discuss menu decisions and sharing recipes with parents to encourage the continuation of school meals at home.

In addition, further research could explore the relationship between dining hall supervision and children's eating behaviours in greater depth. Future studies could examine how increased adult encouragement during school mealtimes leads to greater acceptance of healthier foods among young pupils.

Finally, further research should consider the role of socioeconomic inequalities in shaping the implementation of school food standards, particularly regarding funding structures linked to

free school meal eligibility. Expanding research across the wider geographical area would help determine whether schools in more affluent areas consistently experience greater financial pressures due to lower free school meal uptake. This is particularly relevant in the context of rising food costs, which may further exacerbate disparities between schools and impact their abilities to provide nutritious meals.

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Appendices

Evidence of ethical approval

Thank you for registering the project as involving only *minimal ethical issues* in accordance with the criteria outlined in UREC Approved [SP&BP01](#) “Projects Associated with Minimal Ethical Issues”. Please note the following important information:

- UG/PGT projects that involve only minimal ethical issues are **not routinely reviewed** by the School Research Ethics Committee (REC).
- The **supervisor is responsible** for ensuring that:
 - The correct ethics application is attached to this notification
 - The application form and supporting documents are accurate
 - the responses provided in the [UG/PGT School REC research ethics Submission Tool](#) are correct.

This approval notification is valid only if:

- The ethics application was submitted by the supervisor via the [UG/PGT School REC research ethics Submission Tool](#)
- The submission includes the ethics application form and all relevant supporting documents.

If the ethics application is incorrect, incomplete, was not submitted by the supervisor or if the supervisor is uncertain about the accuracy of any part of the application form or supporting documents, this approval notification should be **disregarded**. The supervisor should instruct the student to revise the application and the supervisor should resubmit the revised application via the UG/PGT School REC Research Ethics Submission Tool.

Once a finalised application is submitted, if the supervisor believes that:

- The project is **not limited to minimal ethical issues** in accordance with the criteria outlined in UREC Approved [SP&BP01](#) “Projects Associated with Minimal Ethical Issues”, or
- The project **should be reviewed by the School REC for any reason**, they should disregard this notification and contact the Chair of the School REC.

Approval is **subject to the conditions outlined below**.

Reference number: 251205LJMUPAHREC33

Name: Daisy Ward

School/Department: Public & Allied Health (PAH)

Project title: Primary School Chefs’ Experiences of Implementing the UK School Food Standards: A Qualitative Study on the Challenges of Supporting Children’s Diets in the Wirral.

Supervisor: Conan Leavey

Conditions of approval:

- The study is conducted in accordance with UREC Approved [SP&BP01](#) “Projects Associated with Minimal Ethical Issues”
- Supervisors are required to ensure the participant and gatekeeper documents are correct before they are used.
- All [participant-facing documents](#) must reflect current practices and be informed by ongoing risk assessments
- Participant and gatekeeper documents must include accurate data processing, management and protection information from the [latest LJMU templates](#).
- Any incidents (including adverse events or breaches) must be reported in line with the [LJMU Research Ethics & Governance Standard Operating Procedures](#)
- A favourable ethics opinion and approval must be obtained for any study amendments
- Compliance with LJMU Research Ethics & Governance Standard Operating Procedures, [LJMU Health and Safety Codes of practice and risk assessment policy and procedures](#) and [LJMU code of practice for research](#)
- Ensure the study is covered by [UMAL liability/indemnity](#)
- Arrange any necessary agreements/contracts (e.g. collaboration, data processing/sharing, intellectual property rights, financial provisions, material transfer etc.)
- Obtain appropriate gatekeeper/management permission before commencing the study
- Use the [LJMU logo](#) on all participant/parent/gatekeeper facing materials (e.g. posters, information sheets, consent forms, questionnaires).
- Ensure that consent forms, study data/information and all project-related documents are accessible to the supervisory team and/or LJMU for monitoring, auditing and data authenticity purposes.

Approval period

This Approval is valid for **one year** from the date of this notification. If your project will continue beyond this period, you must submit a [study amendment form](#) to request an extension.

For further information, please visit the [LJMU Research Ethics and Governance webpages](#)

Yours sincerely

LJMU Public & Allied Health (PAH) Research Ethics Committee

Participant information sheet



Title of Project: "Primary School Chefs' Experiences of Implementing the UK School Food Standards: A Qualitative Study on the Challenges of Supporting Children's Diets in the Wirral."

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET Interview [Primary school chefs]

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the project is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

1. What is the purpose of the project?

This project aims to explore how school chefs navigate the challenges of working in a fast-paced environment while adhering to multiple policies and procedures, with a particular focus on the implementation of the UK School Food Standards. The study seeks to examine how chefs balance compliance with these standards alongside budgetary limitations, time constraints, and the diverse dietary needs of children. This research is a student-led dissertation project undertaken as part of the requirements for the Environmental Health degree programme.

2. Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been identified as a potential participant through RPJ3 and fit the criteria as you are employed as a primary school chef.

You should only take part if the following conditions apply to you:

- **Currently employed as a primary school chef** working in a **primary school within the Wirral**, Northwest England.
- **Directly involved in planning, preparing, or serving school meals** that follow the **UK School Food Standards**.
- **Aged 18 or over** and able to give **informed consent** to participate in the study.
- **Willing and available** to take part in a **30–45-minute interview** (either in person or online via Microsoft Teams).

You must not take part if the following conditions apply to you:

- **Not directly involved in food preparation or menu planning**, such as administrative staff, midday supervisors, or kitchen porters.
- Working in **secondary schools, private schools, or non-school catering settings**.
- **Under 18 years of age** or **unable to provide informed consent**.
- **Do not wish to be audio-recorded**, as this is essential for accurate data collection and transcription.

This is to ensure the project stays relevant and the participants can answer the questions that are relevant to the field they work in.

Participant recruitment will consist of 6-9 participants.

3. Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether to take part. You can ask questions about the project before deciding. You can stop being part of the project at any time, without giving a reason.

4. What will happen to me if I take part?

We will ask you to sign a consent form. Please consider retaining a copy of the record of consent for your future reference.

The interview will take place at your place of work or on Microsoft Teams, depending on your preference and should take approximately 30 minutes. The interview will discuss how you implement the UK School Food Standards in your daily work, how budget and time constraints affect your role, and your observations of children's eating habits. You will also be invited to discuss any challenges as well as strategies that work well when preparing and serving meals.

Please remember, you have the right to decline to answer any questions you do not want to and you can also ask to pause or stop the interview at any time, and we can reschedule if needed.

5. Will I be photographed or video/audio recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

You do not have to be audio recorded, but you cannot take part in the project if you are not happy for your voice to be recorded. You are free to stop the recording at any time, but you will not be able to take part in the project if you do so.

6. Are there any possible disadvantages or risks in taking part?

Taking part in the project is not anticipated to cause you any disadvantages or discomfort. The potential physical or psychological harm or distress will be the same as that experienced in everyday life.

7. Are there any benefits in taking part?

There will be no direct or personal benefit to you from taking part.

8. What personal data will be collected, and what will happen to this?

The information you give us, or that we collect from you, from which you can be identified (e.g. from identifiers such as your name, date of birth, audio recording, etc.), is known as personal data. The personal data we will collect is:

- A record of consent (which will include your name)
- We will make a transcript of your interview and then delete the recording. We will use a code/pseudonym so that you cannot be directly identified from the transcript. The transcript will be stored securely at LJMU.

9. Will the project be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other outputs?

The findings from the project will be written up in a dissertation. We will write our report in a way that no one can work out that you took part in the project. We would like your permission to use direct quotations, but without identifying you in any outputs.

10. Who has reviewed this project?

This Project has received a favourable ethics opinion from an LJMU Research Ethics Committee. Research Ethics Committee Reference Number:

11. Whom do I contact if I have a concern about the project or wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this project, please contact Conan Leavey email c.leavey@ljmu.ac.uk, and we will do our best to answer your query. You should expect a reply within 10 working days. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at Liverpool John Moores University, who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

Chair, Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee; Email: FullReviewUREC@ljmu.ac.uk; Tel: 0151 231 2121; Research Innovation Services, Liverpool John Moores University, Exchange Station, Liverpool L2 2QP

12. Further information and Contact details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Principal Investigator: Daisy Ward

State whether the investigator is: an LJMU undergraduate student

LJMU Email address:

LJMU School/faculty: Public & Allied Health

LJMU Central telephone number: 0151 231 2121

Supervisor Name: Conan Leavey

Supervisor's LJMU Email address: c.leavey@ljmu.ac.uk

Gatekeeper information sheet



GATEKEEPER INFORMATION SHEET

Title of Project: Primary School Chefs' Experiences of Implementing the UK School Food Standards: A Qualitative Study on the Challenges of Supporting Children's Diets in the Wirral."

Research Ethics Committee Reference Number: 251205LJMUPAHREC33

1. What is the reason for this information email?

You have been identified as a gatekeeper to individuals whom we would like to invite to participate in a research project

What is the project?

The project is a qualitative study looking into the experiences of primary school chefs in the Wirral as they implement the UK School Food Standards. It will examine how these chefs understand and apply the government guidelines on healthy school meals, and how they navigate everyday challenges such as limited budgets, children's food preferences, and time pressures while supporting healthy diets among pupils.

This project is approved by Liverpool John Moores University.

2. Who are the participants?

We are looking to recruit 6 – 9 primary school chefs in the Wirral. The participants have been identified because they are registered as school chefs with RPJ3.

What is involved for the participants?

Participants will be asked to join a 30–45-minute discussion about their role as a primary school chef. The investigators will provide prompts and questions during the discussion, asking about the different diets they cater for, budgets and time constraints, how they implement the UK School Food Standards, the challenges and limitations they encounter, and what works well.

3. What are we asking you to do?

- Permit the investigator to visit the school and conduct an interview on-site with the participant
- Permit the individual to participate during working hours

If you are willing and able to assist in the project, what happens next?

Please return the completed gatekeeper consent form.

4. Will the name of my organisation taking part in the project be kept confidential?

Yes. Participants and the school they work at will be kept anonymous.

5. Whom do I contact if I have a concern about the project or wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this project, please contact the project's supervisor, Conan Leavey, email: c.leavey@ljmu.ac.uk, and we will do our best to answer your query. You should expect a reply within 10 working days. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at Liverpool John Moors University, who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

Chair, Liverpool John Moors University Research Ethics Committee; Email: FullReviewUREC@ljmu.ac.uk; Tel: 0151 231 2121; Research Innovation Services, Liverpool John Moors University, Exchange Station, Liverpool L2 2QP

6. Contact details

Principal Investigator: Daisy Ward, LJMU undergraduate student, LJMU Email address: phidward@ljmu.ac.uk LJMU School/Faculty: Public & Allied Health LJMU Central telephone number: 0151 231 2121

IF APPLICABLE Supervisor Name: Dr Conan Leavey

LJMU Email address: c.leavey@ljmu.ac.uk

Consent Forms



PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (interview)

Project title: "Primary School Chefs' Experiences of Implementing the UK School Food Standards: A Qualitative Study on the Challenges of Supporting Children's Diets in the Wirral."

Research Ethics Committee Reference Number:

Principal Investigator: Daisy Ward
 LJMU undergraduate student
 LJMU Email address: *phidward@ljmu.ac.uk*
 LJMU School/Faculty: *Public & Allied Health*
 LJMU Central telephone number: 0151 231 2121
Supervisor Name: Dr Conan Leavey
 LJMU Email address: *c.leavey@ljmu.ac.uk*

If you are happy to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below

		Please initial	
1.	I confirm that I have read the information sheet dated 20/11/2025 (version 1) for the above project, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	DK	
2.	I understand what taking part in the project involves.	DK	
3.	I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this project and understand that I can refuse to answer questions I can withdraw from the project at any time, without giving a reason and without penalty or my legal rights being affected.	DK	
4.	To the best of my knowledge, I do not meet any of the exclusion criteria outlined in the information sheet for this project. If this changes later during project participation, I agree to notify the investigators immediately.	DK	
5.	I understand that the project involves taking audio recordings of me and I am happy to proceed. I understand that I will not be able to participate in the project if I later decide not to be audio recorded.	DK	
6.	I understand who has access to personal data will have provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	DK	
7.	I understand that personal data will remain confidential and that all efforts will be made to ensure I cannot be identified in reports or any further outputs.	DK	
8.	I understand that parts of our conversation will be used verbatim in future publications or presentations and that all efforts will be made to ensure I cannot be identified in reports or any further outputs.	DK	
	I agree that parts of our conversation will be used verbatim in future publications or presentations, and I agree to be attributed to quotes and identifiable in reports or publications.	YES X	NO

9.	I understand that even though all efforts will be made to ensure I cannot be identified, I may be indirectly identifiable when the project findings are disseminated. If the investigators think this may be the case, they will seek explicit consent from me ahead of any publication	DK
10.	I understand the potential risks of being identifiable in reports and any future outputs when the findings of the project are disseminated	DK
11.	I agree to take part in this project	DK

Data Protection. Any personal information we collect and use to conduct this project will be processed in accordance with data protection law as explained in the Participant Information Sheet and the LJMU [Privacy Notice for Research Participants](https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/legal/privacy-notice-and-cookies/external-stakeholders-privacy-policy/research-participants-privacy-notice) (<https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/legal/privacy-notice-and-cookies/external-stakeholders-privacy-policy/research-participants-privacy-notice>)

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Diana Klaus

19/01/26



I have witnessed the accurate reading of the consent form with the potential participant, and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the individual has given consent freely

Name of Investigator

Date

Signature

Daisy Ward

20/11/2025

Daisy Ward

Please consider retaining a copy of this consent form for your future reference.



PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (interview)

Project title: "Primary School Chefs' Experiences of Implementing the UK School Food Standards: A Qualitative Study on the Challenges of Supporting Children's Diets in the Wirral."

Research Ethics Committee Reference Number:

Principal Investigator: *Daisy Ward*
 LJMU undergraduate student
 LJMU Email address: *phidward@ljmu.ac.uk*
 LJMU School/Faculty: *Public & Allied Health*
 LJMU Central telephone number: 0151 231 2121
Supervisor Name: *Dr Conan Leavey*
 LJMU Email address: *c.leavey@ljmu.ac.uk*

If you are happy to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below

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2.	I understand what taking part in the project involves.	JG
3.	I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this project and understand that I can refuse to answer questions I can withdraw from the project at any time, without giving a reason and without penalty or my legal rights being affected.	JG
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	I agree that parts of our conversation will be used verbatim in future publications or presentations, and I agree to be attributed to quotes and identifiable in reports or publications.	YES ☒ NO ☐

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10.	I understand the potential risks of being identifiable in reports and any future outputs when the findings of the project are disseminated	JG
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Name of Participant
Joe Greary

Date
26/01/26

Signature 

I have witnessed the accurate reading of the consent form with the potential participant, and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the individual has given consent freely

Name of Investigator
Daisy Ward

Date
20/11/2025

Signature
Daisy Ward

Please consider retaining a copy of this consent form for your future reference.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (interview)

Project title: "Primary School Chefs' Experiences of Implementing the UK School Food Standards: A Qualitative Study on the Challenges of Supporting Children's Diets in the Wirral."

Research Ethics Committee Reference Number:

Principal Investigator: *Daisy Ward*
LJMU undergraduate student
LJMU Email address: *phidward@ljmu.ac.uk*
LJMU School/Faculty: *Public & Allied Health*
LJMU Central telephone number: 0151 231 2121
Supervisor Name: *Dr Conan Leavey*
LJMU Email address: *c.leavey@ljmu.ac.uk*

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	I agree that parts of our conversation will be used verbatim in future publications or presentations, and I agree to be attributed to quotes and identifiable in reports or publications.	YES ✓	NO

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10.	I understand the potential risks of being identifiable in reports and any future outputs when the findings of the project are disseminated	
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Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Maria Spence

30/01/26



I have witnessed the accurate reading of the consent form with the potential participant, and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the individual has given consent freely

Name of Investigator
Daisy Ward

Date
20/11/2025

Signature
Daisy Ward

Please consider retaining a copy of this consent form for your future reference.



PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (interview)

Project title: "Primary School Chefs' Experiences of Implementing the UK School Food Standards: A Qualitative Study on the Challenges of Supporting Children's Diets in the Wirral."

Research Ethics Committee Reference Number:

Principal Investigator: Daisy Ward
 LJMU undergraduate student
 LJMU Email address: *phidward@ljmu.ac.uk*
 LJMU School/Faculty: *Public & Allied Health*
 LJMU Central telephone number: 0151 231 2121
Supervisor Name: Dr Conan Leavey
 LJMU Email address: *c.leavey@ljmu.ac.uk*

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1.	I confirm that I have read the information sheet dated 20/11/2025 (version 1) for the above project, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	CH
2.	I understand what taking part in the project involves.	CH
3.	I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this project and understand that I can refuse to answer questions I can withdraw from the project at any time, without giving a reason and without penalty or my legal rights being affected.	CH
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8.	I understand that parts of our conversation will be used verbatim in future publications or presentations and that all efforts will be made to ensure I cannot be identified in reports or any further outputs.	CH
	I agree that parts of our conversation will be used verbatim in future publications or presentations, and I agree to be attributed to quotes and identifiable in reports or publications.	YES NO

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10.	I understand the potential risks of being identifiable in reports and any future outputs when the findings of the project are disseminated	UH
11.	I agree to take part in this project	UH

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Name of Participant	Date	Signature
Lorrane Henderson	30/01/26	

I have witnessed the accurate reading of the consent form with the potential participant, and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the individual has given consent freely

Name of Investigator	Date	Signature
Daisy Ward	20/11/2025	Daisy Ward

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PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (interview)

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Supervisor Name: Dr Conan Leavey
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2.	I understand what taking part in the project involves.	<i>DL</i>				
3.	I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this project and understand that I can refuse to answer questions I can withdraw from the project at any time, without giving a reason and without penalty or my legal rights being affected.	<i>DL</i>				
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YES	NO					
☒	☐					

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Name of Participant

Clair Riley

Date

02/02/26

Signature



I have witnessed the accurate reading of the consent form with the potential participant, and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the individual has given consent freely

Name of Investigator

Daisy Ward

Date

20/11/2025

Signature

Daisy Ward

Please consider retaining a copy of this consent form for your future reference.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (interview)

Project title: "Primary School Chefs' Experiences of Implementing the UK School Food Standards: A Qualitative Study on the Challenges of Supporting Children's Diets in the Wirral."

Research Ethics Committee Reference Number:

Principal Investigator: *Daisy Ward*
 LJMU undergraduate student
 LJMU Email address: *phidward@ljmu.ac.uk*
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 LJMU Central telephone number: 0151 231 2121
Supervisor Name: *Dr Conan Leavey*
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If you are happy to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below

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8.	I understand that parts of our conversation will be used verbatim in future publications or presentations and that all efforts will be made to ensure I cannot be identified in reports or any further outputs.	DK	
	I agree that parts of our conversation will be used verbatim in future publications or presentations, and I agree to be attributed to quotes and identifiable in reports or publications.	YES DK	NO

9.	I understand that even though all efforts will be made to ensure I cannot be identified, I may be indirectly identifiable when the project findings are disseminated. If the investigators think this may be the case, they will seek explicit consent from me ahead of any publication	DK
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Name of Participant
Denise Keate

Date
04/02/26

Signature


I have witnessed the accurate reading of the consent form with the potential participant, and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the individual has given consent freely

Name of Investigator
Daisy Ward

Date
20/11/2025

Signature
Daisy Ward

Please consider retaining a copy of this consent form for your future reference.

Interview Questionnaire

Interpretation & Application of the Standards

- How do the UK food standards influence your day-to-day decisions about ingredients, recipes, or portion sizes?
- What aspects of the standards do you find easiest and most straightforward to implement?
- Are there any parts of the standards you find difficult to interpret? If so, how do you navigate them?

Challenges in implementing the standards

- What challenges do you face when trying to meet the food standards?
- How do budget constraints affect your ability to feed children?
- Can you discuss difficulties you have experienced with children's food preferences or their acceptance of healthier foods?
- How does time pressure during preparation or service impact your ability to implement the standards?
- Do issues like food waste, storage, or staffing affect how strictly you adhere to the guidelines?

Strategies and adaptations

- What strategies do you use to encourage children to try healthier foods?
- How do you balance children's preferences with meeting the guidelines?
- Can you describe any creative approaches you have used to meet standards under the constraints of catering for primary school-age children?
- From your perspective, do the meals you prepare influence children's diet or eating habits?
- Do you feel that the school food standards help or hinder your ability to support children's nutrition?

Support and wider context

- What training and support have you received to help implement the food standards?
- What additional resources or support would better meet the standards for you?
- How do school leadership, teachers, or parents influence your ability to follow the guidelines?