

Summer Meals Pilot Project 2025 – Ireland

Evaluation Final Report

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)

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Executive Summary

Through the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), the Department of Education and Youth, commissioned Horizons Research to conduct an independent evaluation of the impact and benefits of the Summer 2025 Holiday Meals Pilot Programme in youth work settings across Ireland.

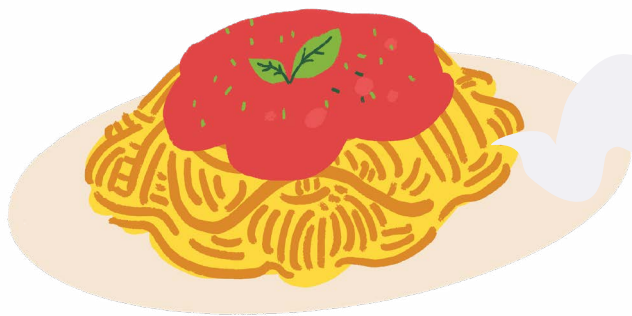
This evaluation examined: (i) the prevalence and impact of holiday hunger among young people attending youth work programmes; (ii) the nutritional and wellbeing impacts of the Summer 2025 Holiday Meals Pilot; (iii) delivery barriers and enablers; (iv) unintended consequences and value for money; (v) which food provision models worked best; and (vi) feedback from young people, parents, workers, Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and other stakeholders.

In total, **€463,000** was awarded to **23 organisations**, enabling additional food provision within **41 youth services/projects**, operating under the UBU *Your Place Your Space* framework. The programme exceeded its target of **providing food to over 5,000 young people per week**, providing nutritious meals and snacks. The average daily cost per participant was approximately **€9.50**, with **82%** of total expenditure on food and **18%** on administration and staffing, demonstrating strong value for money relative to impact.

Photos (top) Cork, (middle) Donegal, (bottom) Galway



41 youth services/projects, operating under the UBU Your Place Your Space framework



Key findings



Prevalence and impact of holiday hunger

The evaluation found a *high and widespread level of need* for the pilot. **Sixty per cent of Youth Service Worker** survey respondents reported significant local need (**38% medium; 2% unsure**). Site visits and interviews reinforced these findings, with youth workers frequently observing young people arriving hungry, skipping meals, asking for seconds, or taking food home for their families.

Across the evaluation, food insecurity and holiday hunger emerged as persistent and visible issues. Stakeholders described the pilot as having *“pulled the issue out of the shadows,”* highlighting the scale and immediacy of need within communities and the importance of food provision during school holidays.

Families face their greatest financial strain during school holidays, when the end of school meals creates a *“cliff edge”* in food access. Parental views, captured via youth workers, described the pilot as a lifeline that *“took the worry away”* about feeding their children over the summer.

Most sites relied on relational knowledge rather than formal measurement of food poverty, though qualitative evidence strongly indicated a tangible, if uneven, presence of holiday hunger across settings.



60%

of Youth Service Worker
survey respondents
reported a **significant
local need**



2

Impact on nutritional intake and wellbeing

Baseline self-reporting indicated limited fruit, vegetable, fish and dairy consumption and frequent consumption of sugary drinks and snacks as being the norm amongst many young people reached by the pilot, broadly consistent with dietary surveillance results from national Ireland and UK studies.

During the summer pilot, across all sites, young people tried new foods and ate more regularly, and for some, having access to summer meals shifted them away from visiting local shops for snacks during sessions.

All youth services visited for this evaluation used the funding to provide meals and snacks aligned as much as possible with nutritional standards, including fruits, vegetables, wholegrain foods, lean meats and low-fat dairy, with some featuring home grown produce.

There was also a recognition that providers needed to *“meet young people where they were”* leading to the provision of favoured foods, adjustments for those with sensory sensitivities or dietary requirements and the inclusion of occasional foods and treat days as expected during holidays, with desserts and trips to local restaurants.

Mealtimes were seen as informal learning spaces for social connection, conversation and reflection on positive eating habits, routines and the benefits of nutrition for health. Youth workers and young people alike reported better mood, energy, and concentration, as well as calmer and more positive atmospheres during activities.

Evaluation feedback also found that involving young people in menu planning, cooking/ baking sessions, shopping and food preparation helped build confidence, teamwork and practical life skills, particularly among older teens who linked participation to employability and independence.

Some sites provided ingredients and recipes for young people to take home, extending the learning experience and nutrition benefits beyond the youth work setting, achieving wider impacts for other family members.



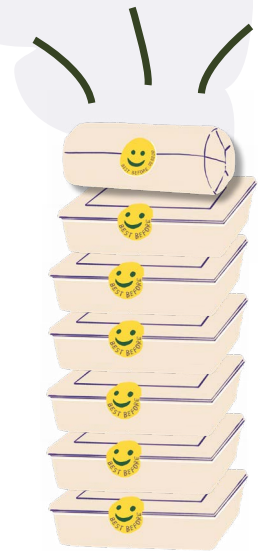
3

Barriers and enablers for effective delivery

Initial guidance for the pilot was seen as too prescriptive and late for summer planning, but subsequent flexibility was widely welcomed. Effective sites had a named coordinator, strong supplier relationships, appropriate onsite facilities and youth-led menus. ETBs provided essential coordination and support but did so largely without additional resources.

Services identified needs for training in food safety and hygiene, nutrition and inclusive practice, as well as for light-touch monitoring tools, and basic equipment (e.g., refrigeration, transport containers, warmers).

Shared resources such as menu templates, recipes and shopping lists, grow your own ideas, case studies of what worked well, and youth work-aligned materials were also recommended for future iterations of the programme.

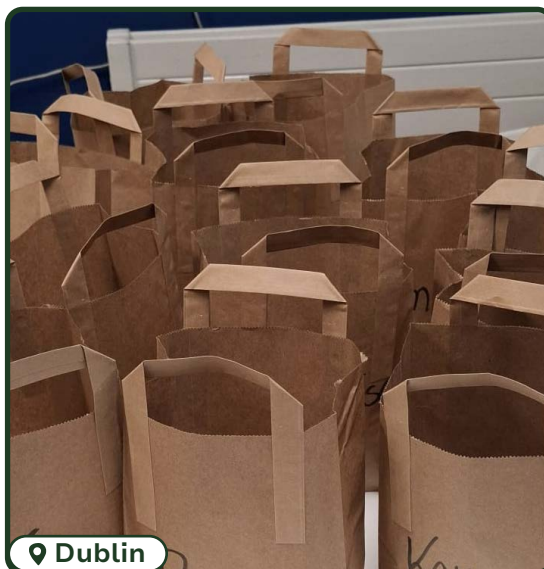


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Unintended consequences and cost-effectiveness

All practitioners interviewed viewed food as a powerful youth-work tool, enhancing attendance and retention (especially among older teens) and enabling youth workers to re-engage young people who had drifted away. Mealtimes strengthened relationships, opened space for pastoral support, and provided entry points for wider interventions.

Initial concerns about food waste diminished as sites adopted flexible serving times, youth-led menu choices and “take-home” portions. These practices reduced waste while discreetly addressing household need.





Models of food provision that worked best

No single model was universally seen as best. In-house cooking provided the greatest opportunity for nutritional control, youth engagement and skill development, while contracted catering enabled participation in settings with limited staff, time or facilities. Mixed models - such as preparing snacks onsite and buying in hot meals - were common and effective. Voucher approaches offered choice but required careful oversight.

Effectiveness ultimately hinged on how food was integrated into youth-work practice-valuing voluntary participation, relationships, inclusion and youth voice - rather than on any one delivery model. Youth workers, adept at making the most of limited resources, appreciated the additional funds that enabled greater variety, the inclusion of fresh ingredients, flexible eating times/ locations around activities and creative approaches to youth engagement.

In house cooking (Limerick)



In house cooking & catered (Donegal)



Catered (Offaly)



Stakeholder feedback

Young people described the meals as *“better than school dinners,”* valued eating together, and appreciated learning new skills. Many said the programme *“saved us money”* and *“made me feel good.”*

Many parents and guardians spoken to by workers expressed relief and gratitude, reporting reduced financial anxiety and greater confidence knowing children were fed and engaged in activities. Youth workers observed improvements in mood, focus, attendance and confidence, while ETBs emphasised the importance of clear communication, early planning and cross-departmental collaboration.

Policy stakeholders across departments endorsed continuation and mainstreaming, with clearer governance structures, formalised ETB coordination roles, and flexible funding aligned with national frameworks including the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme, the School Meals expansion plan, Healthy Ireland, and the European Child Guarantee.

Overall, holiday hunger was seen as being real, widespread, and most acute during school breaks. The Summer Meals Pilot met and, in many aspects, exceeded its core aims, reaching more young people than anticipated, improving nutrition - albeit for a short period of time - for many young people, supporting wellbeing and learning, reducing family stress, and strengthening engagement with youth services.

The evaluation findings provide strong evidence for considering moving from pilot to a permanent, cross-departmental programme with ring-fenced annual funding, evaluation, and *inclusion-by-design* - embedding holiday meals within Ireland’s wider strategies on child poverty, health and education.



“[The programme] made me feel good.”
-Young person

What was or was not effective in mitigating food poverty in a youth work setting?



The Pilot showed that young people who attended ate more regularly, tried new foods, and developed healthier habits; parents reported reduced financial stress and anxiety.

Photo 📍 Limerick



The Pilot showed that engagement and wellbeing did improve for many participants who took up the offer of food – including better attendance, connection with peers and trust with workers.

Photo 📍 Donegal



The Pilot showed that services were most effective through locally tailored models (in-house, mixed, or contracted catering) that aligned with youth-work practice.

Photo 📍 Carlow



The Pilot was constrained by late funding, some sites having limited facilities, and lack of coordination of resources reduced reach and planning capacity in some sites.

Photo 📍 Galway

Did the pilot demonstrate that continuing such a programme would be viable and cost-effective?



- € The Pilot model was effective in reaching its target of over 5,000 young people per week. Now that sites have experience of the Pilot, there is a sense that the scale of ambition could be greater next year, with more sites, activities and young people being targeted, in line with the level of need.
- € While longer-term impacts could not be captured within this evaluation, meaning cost-effectiveness cannot yet be demonstrated against long-term food poverty outcomes, the findings show that modest funding delivered measurable short-term gains in nutrition, wellbeing, engagement, and family relief.
- € The Pilot showed that leveraging existing youth service infrastructure kept administrative costs low (18%) and maximised local impact.
- € The Pilot showed that the scheme would be strengthened by predictable, multi-year funding, dedicated coordination roles (via ETBs), and modest investment in equipment and training.

Does this evaluation lead to the conclusion that that this programme or similar should continue in the future?



- € Overwhelmingly, the evaluation concludes that this programme or similar should continue in future years. The Pilot showed that this approach can mitigate the risk of food poverty for participating young people and their families, can enhance wellbeing and learning, and represents a cost-effective public investment.
- € The Pilot aligns with Healthy Ireland, the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme, and the European Child Guarantee, providing a proven mechanism to help deliver these policy goals locally.
- € Permanent, cross-departmental programme with ring-fenced annual funding, ETB coordination, and flexible local delivery would help ensure sustained impact.

What Works in Holiday Food Programmes: Lessons from Comparative Evidence



Across the UK and Europe, holiday food programmes have emerged in response to food insecurity, adopting different approaches, settings and timescales. See Annex A for further details.

-  Holiday food initiatives are **most effective when combining** nutritious meals with enriching activities and learning opportunities for young people.
-  Young people gain **benefits beyond nutrition** including social connections, confidence and life skills, while parents experience reduced stress, improved ability to work or socialise and schools report improved attendance and relationships with young people and their families after holiday participation.
-  **Multi-year funding models are preferred** to support sustainable infrastructure and established staffing which is not possible when funding is uncertain.
-  Successful programmes combine **central coordination with local flexibility** to allow community-led delivery that adapts to local needs and infrastructure.
-  **Universal or mixed-access models** within vulnerable communities, inviting all children to attend while prioritising those from low-income households.
-  **Programmes must align with nutritional standards and provision of accredited training** for staff and volunteers in food safety, nutrition and inclusivity (supporting young people with additional support needs and cultural sensitivities).
-  **Ongoing monitoring** to identify what works well and sharing of best practice through built-in national learning networks.
-  **Flexibility** in the delivery setting across venues from schools, community centres, parks and youth clubs maximising community assets.
-  **Partnership working** including businesses, charities, sports associations and voluntary organisations working within local communities to avoid duplication.
-  **Integration of programmes with wider policy initiatives** that focus on child poverty, food insecurity and health and wellbeing strategies for young people.

Policy learning and implications for future design

- 1.** The evidence suggests that interventions such as the summer meals programme are not temporary fixes but essential responses to structural deprivation.
- 2.** The youth work setting is a strong and effective delivery channel, offering an accessible, stigma-free and relationship-based environment where young people could engage with food provision as part of their normal activities. Youth workers are effective in encouraging young people towards healthier foods and drinks.
- 3.** The pilot demonstrated strong value for money but was not cost-neutral. There was a call for additional funds, ringfenced to address “holiday hunger” (at all times of the year) as part of core grants to youth services.
- 4.** Dedicated funding for coordination, staff time, training and facilities was also seen as essential. ETBs and services also highlighted the importance of early planning and consistent funding to avoid “cliff edges” in provision – from school terms into holiday periods and also from good quality summer meals provision back into the school term.
- 5.** Clearer coordination between departments, ETBs and youth services is needed to embed holiday food provision within wider strategies on child poverty, wellbeing and education. The pilot operated across the policy domains of education, youth work, social protection and health, yet wider delivery responsibilities often remained fragmented.
- 6.** A single inter-departmental steering group was suggested - bringing together the Departments of Education and Youth, Social Protection, and Health, alongside the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office to help ensure coherent oversight and strategic policy alignment.
- 7.** ETBs proved to be a crucial link between national policy and local delivery, supporting youth services, managing partnerships and monitoring outcomes. However, this role was largely undertaken without additional resources or formal recognition. Future programmes could build on this strength by resourcing ETBs as regional coordinators, with dedicated leads for nutrition and wellbeing to connect schools, youth services and community partners.
- 8.** Joined-up approaches were most effective where youth services worked closely with schools and community partners to ensure shared planning, consistent nutrition standards which would help ensure continuity and reduce duplication.

Embedding these practices within a national cross-sector framework would enable more efficient use of resources and ensure that holiday food provision contributes directly to Ireland’s wider strategies on child poverty, wellbeing and education.



Chapter 1:

Background and Introduction

The core objectives of the evaluation were to:

- 🍎 Measure the prevalence and impact of holiday hunger amongst young people attending youth work programmes;
- 🍎 Evaluate impact of the Holiday Meals Programme on nutritional intake and wellbeing amongst participating young people;
- 🍎 Identify barriers and enablers for effective delivery as experienced by youth work programmes;
- 🍎 Explore unintended consequences and cost-effectiveness of the pilot programme;
- 🍎 Assess the models of food provision that worked best;
- 🍎 Gather stakeholder feedback from youth, parents, workers, and ETBs.

Child Poverty and Food Insecurity

Child poverty in Ireland remains a persistent and deepening social concern, with the latest *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* indicating approximately 188,000 children, 15.3% (aged >18 years) are living in households whose income falls below 60% of the national median.¹ While this represents only a marginal increase since 2022, the more significant shift is found in rates of consistent poverty by age group, which was found to be highest among children aged 0 to 17 years, rising to 8.5% in 2024.² This means that over 100,000 children in Ireland now experience both income poverty and enforced deprivation, unable to afford essentials that many households take for granted.

The deepening of deprivation is further reflected in child-specific measures from 2024, with 13.8% of children under 16 experiencing material deprivation.³ These indicators highlight not only the scale of economic strain faced by families but also the increasing difficulty many parents have in meeting basic, everyday needs; from adequate clothing to sufficient heating and, critically, consistent access to nutritious food daily, such as fruits, vegetables and a meal containing a source of protein such as chicken, fish, meat or equivalent. Further information on the context for the Summer Meals Pilot can be found in **Chapter 3: Literature Review**



1 Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024, "[Poverty](#)"

2 Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024, "[Key Findings](#)"

3 Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) Module on Child Deprivation 2024, "[Key Findings](#)"

School Meals and the ‘Holiday Gap’

Ireland’s School Meals Programme provides funding to ensure schoolchildren have access to regular, nutritious food through two main schemes. One is the non-statutory School Meals Local Projects Scheme which is funded through the Department of Social Protection. It involves primary and secondary schools, local groups, and voluntary organisations collaborating on programme delivery. The second is the statutory Urban School Meals Scheme, aimed at children in primary school. This scheme is run by local authorities and part-funded by the Department of Social Protection.

Programme for Government

The 2020 Programme for Government, *Our Shared Future*, pledged to continue reviewing and expanding the country’s new Hot School Meals initiative. Since its pilot in 2019, and in response to growing evidence as well as advocacy work, successive Budgets have extended the provision of hot meals at primary school level. In 2025, the government confirmed a continued commitment to improve the Free Hot School Meals programme, ensuring adherence to nutritional standards and the provision of meals to meet the dietary requirements of students.⁴

School Meals Programme

The School Meals Scheme has now been expanded to all primary schools across the country. This expansion includes primary schools outside the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme, which has traditionally supported children in disadvantaged schools. Children from 3,200 primary schools in Ireland are today eligible for the School Meals programme, meaning 550,000 Irish children will be provided with a hot lunch during the school day. Post-primary schools are not eligible to apply for hot meals. However, they can receive other food options under the present scheme. Each year, schools supplying school meals must apply for funding.



The nutritional, educational and developmental benefits of the School Meals programme have been well established. The programme gives families, but particularly those on low incomes, the assurance their child will receive a hot meal during the school day.

⁴ Irish Government (2025), “[Programme for Government 2025 – Securing Ireland’s Future](#)” (p68)

The scheme provides guidance for breakfast, lunch, and snacks and nutritional standards are currently under review to ensure healthy options are available.

Holiday Hunger

Opportunities for Youth, National Strategy for Youth Work and related services 2024-2028⁵ focuses on the role played by youth work services in the lives of young people and on strengthening that role in the context of wider national policy making and service delivery for children and young people. In this context UBU, Your Place, Your Space, the government funded youth work programme which has the largest reach in terms of targeted youth engagement was selected as the appropriate site for the Summer Meals 2025 pilot evaluated in this report. In 2024, [UBU, Your Space Your Place](#) provided a service to 91,855 young people.

New measures for 2025 have included⁶:



Hot school meals for more students, including during the summer holidays



€1.3m to allow primary schools who are part of the School Meals Programme to make meals available for the school-based Summer Programme



Around €0.5m has been allocated to develop and deliver a pilot programme to provide meals in selected youth services during the 12-week summer holidays

5 Irish Government (2024), "[Opportunities for Youth: National Strategy for Youth Work and Related Services 2024 - 2028](#)" (p9)

6 Irish Government (2025), "[Programme for Government 2025 – Securing Ireland's Future](#)" (p101)

Organisations including Children’s Rights Alliance and Barnardos have advised the government to take further action to expand school meal programmes to secondary schools, **introduce a programme to address holiday/ out of term hunger**, provide additional supports to low-income families and introduce a food insecurity action plan.

Elsewhere, in similar contexts, the ‘holiday experience gap’ (where children from low-income households are more likely to face poor nutrition, social isolation, and lack of access to structured activities during the gap between school semesters) has been addressed through government funding and initiatives. For example, following successful pilot schemes between 2018 - 2020, the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme was formally rolled out across England in 2021. Since then, it has grown considerably. The UK government recently committed £600 million over three years to continue the programme through 2025 - 2028. Insights gleaned from HAF’s implementation and evaluation could work as a roadmap to inform Ireland’s approach to expanding holiday food provision and integrating it with broader child wellbeing strategies.

The ‘holiday experience gap’ (where children from low-income households are more likely to face poor nutrition, social isolation, and lack of access to structured activities during the gap between school semesters).

In Ireland, the youth work sector plays a critical role in delivering on the government’s commitments to food insecurity as well as in the areas of child poverty and wellbeing, as set out in the Irish government initiative: *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Poverty and Well-being 2023 - 2025*. Youth work services focus on ensuring that children have access to supports and services promoting physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing, and that young people and children are able to participate in enriching activities outside of school, including art, music and sport.

Role of ETBs

Education and Training Boards (ETBs) hold a central statutory role in coordinating and supporting youth work at local level, as set out in the *Education and Training Boards Act 2013*, which requires them to plan, oversee, and integrate the provision of youth services within their areas. Through this mandate, ETBs work closely with youth work organisations to ensure that high-quality, needs-led programmes are available, including enhanced provision during the summer months when many young people rely on accessible activities, supports, and safe social spaces. Crucially, youth work remains

Crucially, youth work remains grounded in the voluntary participation of young people, whose choice to engage is fundamental to the educational ethos of the sector and underpins its capacity to build relationships, foster personal development, and respond meaningfully to their interests and lived experiences.

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Summer 2025 meal programmes

The Summer Meals Pilot Programme, developed by the Department of Education and Youth in collaboration with the Child Poverty and Well-Being Office in the Department of the Taoiseach⁷, commenced on 3 June 2025. In total, approximately €463,000 in funding was allocated to support 41 sites operating under the *UBU Your Place, Your Space framework*⁸ through 23 organisations, listed below in **figure 1** (page 18). The pilot, based solely on the fieldwork conducted by the evaluators, estimated that an average of 30-40 young people attended each proper day, which equates to up to 3,200 per week.⁹

The pilot aimed to support young people aged 10–18 years who may not have regular access to a hot or nutritious meal during the summer holiday period (June to August 2025).

The pilot aimed to support young people aged 10–18 years who may not have regular access to a hot or nutritious meal during the summer holiday period (June to August 2025). Meals were provided using a range of approaches, including on-site preparation, partnerships with local caterers, and community-based delivery models.

Participating youth services included large multi-site organisations, local community-based projects, and specialist services working with particular groups such as young carers, young Travellers, and young people experiencing homelessness. Organisations varied considerably in their size, governance, staffing, and facilities. While some operated from well-equipped centres with established catering partnerships, others relied on local suppliers, mobile kitchens, or shared community facilities to deliver safe and efficient food provision.

The duration of delivery also varied across sites. Some services provided meals throughout the full 12 weeks of the school summer break, while others ran shorter, intensive programmes lasting 2–4 weeks, aligned with activity camps or youth engagement initiatives. Of course, Ireland is not alone in providing summer meals programmes. A summary of comparative programmes from across the UK and Europe can be found at **Annex A**.



7 Irish Government (2023), '[Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office](#)'

8 <https://ubu.gov.ie/>

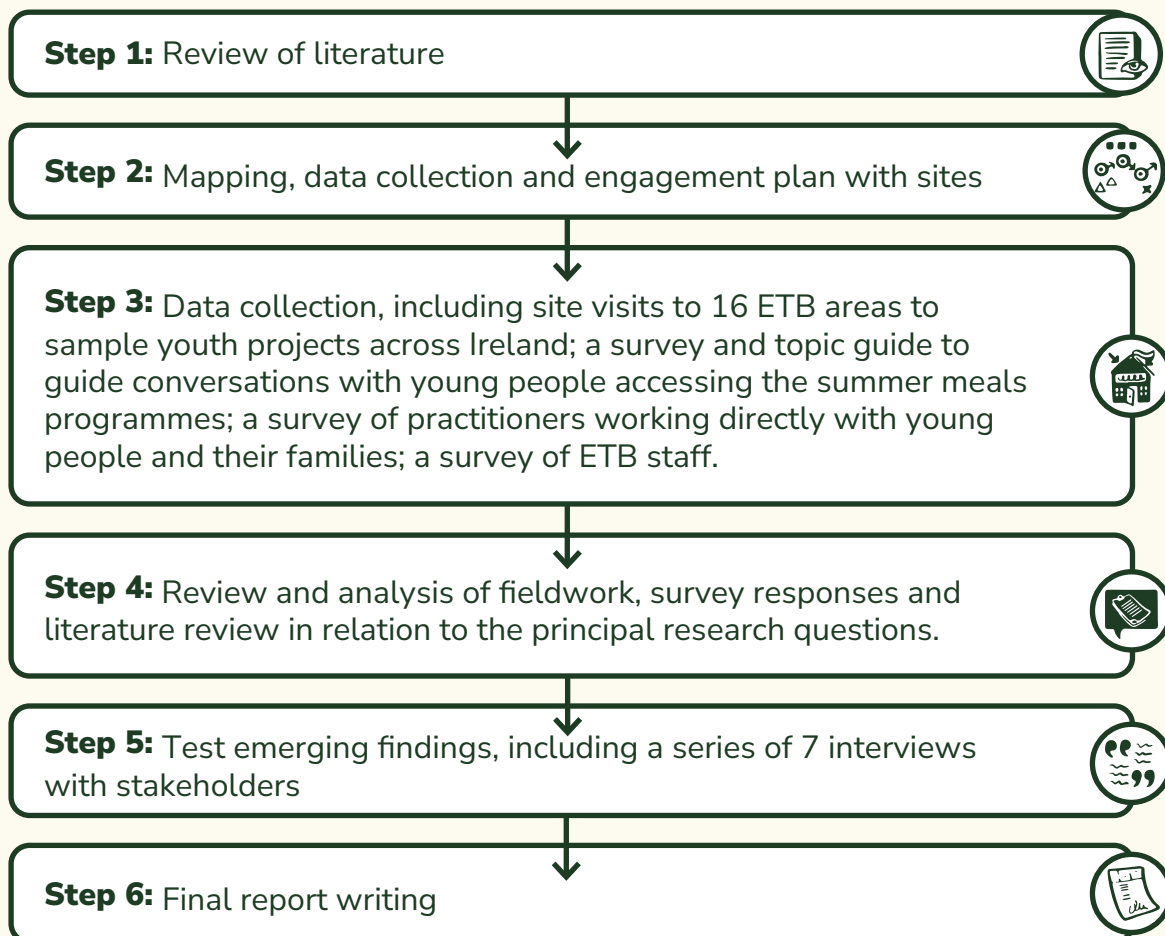
9 Based on Horizons Research evaluation data collected from 16 sites

Figure 1: 2025 Summer Meals Governance



Chapter 2: Evaluation design and methodology

Overview of evaluation approach, methods and steps



Evaluation methods

This evaluation adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the design, delivery, and impact of the *programme*. Multiple data sources were used to capture perspectives from different levels of the system - from young people and youth workers on the frontline to ETB leads and national stakeholders. Quantitative data from surveys (including those with young people, practitioners, and Education and Training Boards) provided measurable insights into programme reach, eating habits, participation, and perceived outcomes. These were complemented by rich qualitative evidence from site visits, interviews, observation notes, and practitioner-led feedback activities, which provided lived experiences, operational challenges, and enabling conditions shaping delivery from site to site. Literature review findings within broader policy and practice frameworks were also reviewed as part of the evaluation, relating to youth work, food insecurity and nutritional standards. The evaluation sought to provide both breadth and depth of insight, enabling triangulation of findings and an understanding of what worked, for whom, and under what conditions.



Data sources

This evaluation drew upon multiple qualitative and quantitative data sources, ensuring a comprehensive view of the Summer 2025 Meals Programme’s implementation, outcomes, and context. A summary table featuring the youth services visited during the evaluation can be found at **Annex B**.

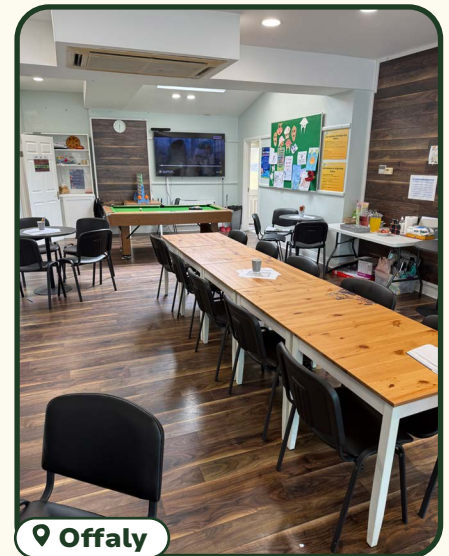
Data sources included:

<p>Literature review and scan of documents and datasets: relevant to holiday hunger, poverty reduction, nutritional interventions, and youth work approaches.</p>	<p>122 documents <i>(including academic papers and policy reports)</i></p>
<p>Project site visits: observation notes: Conducted across a range of geographical and socio-economic contexts.</p>	<p>16 sites <i>(1 site per ETB area)</i></p>
<p>Project site visits: semi-structured interviews with workers, programme leads, and volunteers</p>	<p>39 interviews</p>
<p>Project site visits: informal discussions with young people to gather first-hand perspectives.</p>	<p>37 young people</p>
<p>ETB survey: Structured survey with Education and Training Boards to assess delivery perspectives, programme management, lessons learned and strategic alignment.</p>	<p>11 responses</p>
<p>Young people survey: Quantitative and qualitative feedback from programme participants on food, wellbeing, and engagement.</p>	<p>28 responses</p>
<p>Practitioners survey: Survey of frontline youth workers on delivery models, barriers, and enablers.</p>	<p>52 responses</p>
<p>Practitioner-led feedback with young people: Structured activities led by practitioners to capture youth perspectives.</p>	<p>Over 200 responses</p>
<p>Grant applications: Review of applications submitted by sites to contextualise programme aims and planned delivery models.</p>	<p>23 applications</p>
<p>Stakeholder interviews: 121 online interviews with stakeholders across national, regional, and local levels.</p>	<p>7 interviews</p>



Sampling strategy: site visits

A purposive sampling approach was adopted to ensure representation across diverse delivery contexts - including rural, urban, and mixed settings, as well as a range of facility types such as onsite cooking, bought-in catering, and hybrid models. The original sampling plan aimed to include one youth service per Education and Training Board (ETB) area. In cases where multiple services within an ETB expressed interest, selection was informed by consultation with the ETB lead, who either recommended inclusion of both or prioritised based on funding size and programme scale. Where no clear preference was indicated, sites were chosen according to engagement in programme meetings and the level of funding received. This approach balanced breadth of coverage across the 16 ETB areas with depth of insight into varied operational models and local delivery practices.



Engagement strategy

Engagement combined direct in-person visits with remote interviews and surveys, ensuring accessibility for all stakeholders. Youth voice was prioritised through informal discussions, surveys, and practitioner-led feedback sessions designed to be youth-friendly and non-intimidating. Community and parental perspectives were gathered indirectly through trusted intermediaries (youth workers) to reduce barriers and stigma. Stakeholders were informed about the purpose of the evaluation, and participation was voluntary. Research questions for site visits can be found at **Annex C**.

Surveys

Surveys were deployed to multiple stakeholder groups, each tailored to their role and perspective in the programme. Full survey instruments are included in **Annex C and analysis in Annex D**. These included:

- 🍅 **Young People's Survey (and topic guide):** Baseline dietary habits, satisfaction with the food offer, willingness to try new foods, perceived changes in wellbeing.
- 🍅 **Practitioners' Survey:** Gathering insights on delivery challenges, enablers, perceived impact on young people, and suggestions for improvement.
- 🍅 **ETB Survey:** Exploring Education and Training Board perspectives on programme alignment, quality, and sustainability.

The surveys combined quantitative measures (e.g., ratings, frequency counts) with open-text questions to generate rich qualitative feedback. This mix enabled the evaluation team to quantify patterns while also exploring the nuance behind them.

Data quality and limitations

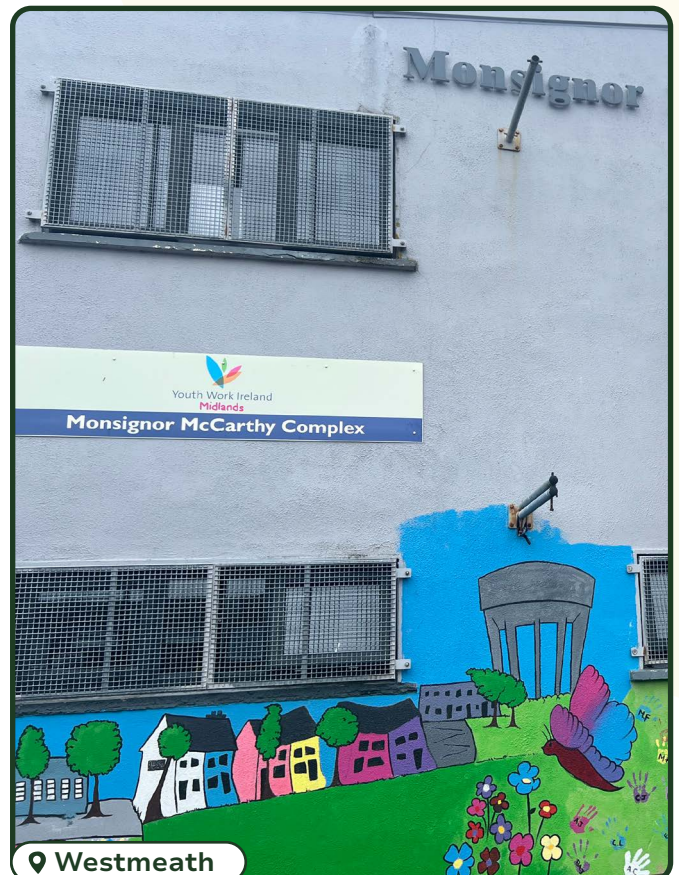
While the mixed-methods approach provided rich, triangulated data, some limitations must be acknowledged:

- Despite a high rate of return for services across the evaluation methods, no sites completed food diaries, which was part of the original evaluation plan.
- Surveys and interviews relied on self-reported accounts, which may be subject to recall bias or positive reporting bias.
- Site visits were snapshots in time and may not fully reflect the diversity of activities or meals provided across the programme period.
- Parental views, and some young people views, were primarily mediated through youth workers, potentially filtering perspectives.

Despite these limitations, the breadth of sources and consistency of themes across data types provides confidence in the robustness of findings.



📍 Dublin, (Memorial Garden)



📍 Westmeath

Chapter 3: Literature review

Child poverty and deprivation in Ireland

In Ireland, being at risk of poverty or income poverty means earning less than 60% of the national median income. For a single adult in 2024, this threshold sits at €346 per week. Basic or enforced deprivation occurs when someone can not afford at least two of 11 essentials, which include nutritious food, adequate heating or suitable clothing. Whilst 15.7% of Ireland's population experiences enforced deprivation, some groups are at particular risk including one-parent families (46.3%), people with disabilities (38%) and unemployed people (37.8%).

Children are more likely than any other age group to experience deprivation or consistent poverty. The additional costs of raising a family and challenges combining care and employment can lead to this disproportionate poverty burden. Some groups of children in Ireland are significantly more likely to live in poverty, such as those living in families headed by a lone parent, Traveller and Roma families, larger families, families where the mother has a low level of education and families headed by a person with a disability or someone who is unemployed. In addition, child and family homelessness is a persistent issue, often requiring children to spend long periods of time living in emergency accommodation. The August 2025 Barnardos Ireland homeless briefing reported that 4958 children were living in emergency accommodation in June 2025, coinciding with the start of the summer meals pilot. This figure represents an increase of over 500 children (4,404 children) from June 2024 and almost double the figure from five years earlier, in June 2020 (2,653 children).¹⁰

Children are more likely than any other age group to experience deprivation or consistent poverty.

Despite nationwide improvements in deprivation measures (including employment and population growth), the gap between Ireland's most disadvantaged areas and the national average has also increased. Disadvantaged communities have seen far lower levels of improvement, putting them further from average in relative terms. The number of people living in areas classed as very or extremely disadvantaged has increased from 143,506 individuals to 195,734. Higher levels of unemployment, low educational attainment and higher rates of lone parents are also more prevalent within disadvantaged communities.¹¹ On average, educational achievement for those in the Roma community is lower than the general population and the rate of transfer from primary to second level for Roma children in the years 2022 to 2023 was 89%. Whilst higher than the rate for Travellers (83%), this is lower than the general population (96%).¹²

The Pilot spanned 41 UBU, your space, your place funded youth services across the 16 Education and Training Board (ETB) regions, reflecting a broad mix of urban and rural communities throughout Ireland. Based on the Pobal HP Deprivation Index (2022)¹³, the 41 participating youth service sites display a wide socioeconomic

10 Barnardos (2025), "[Homeless Briefing August 2025](#)" (p3)

11 Pobal (2022), 'Pobal HP Deprivation Index 2022 Briefing note' (p5)

12 Irish. Government (2025), "[Statistical Spotlight #14: Roma in Ireland](#)"

13 [Pobal HP Deprivation Indices \(2022\)](#)



range, though the majority are concentrated in lower-scoring (more deprived) categories. Specifically, 7 areas are classified as *Very Disadvantaged* or *Extremely Disadvantaged* (e.g. Tallaght-Fettercairn, Clondalkin-Moorfield, Athy West Urban, Tuam, and Killeely, Limerick), while 10 are *Disadvantaged* (including Ballymun, Ballyfermot, Bagenalstown, and Enniscorthy). 16 locations fall into *Marginally Below Average* and 6 into *Marginally Above Average*, representing moderately balanced communities with mixed deprivation profiles. Only 2 areas - such as parts of Dun Laoghaire and Rotunda in Dublin - are categorised as *Affluent*. This distribution demonstrates the pilot’s strong focus on reaching communities with significant social and economic challenges, particularly in Dublin’s inner city and western suburbs, Kildare, Tuam, and Limerick.

Food insecurity

While Ireland currently lacks an official food poverty indicator, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) developed a working definition, using data from the *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC)*. Under this framework, which is utilised by the Irish government, food poverty is defined as:

“The inability to have an adequate and nutritious diet due to issues of affordability or accessibility.”

Food poverty is acknowledged as a social determinant of health with adverse health outcomes (including obesity, diabetes and heart disease) and impacts 9% of Ireland’s population. Not simply about hunger, food poverty also encompasses the difficult choices families must make when it comes to food. That includes things like ‘food versus fuel’, skipping meals and trading down,



as well as long-term unhealthier food choices. For most people, the main cause of food poverty is low income in relation to their household costs rather than an inability to manage money or food. For others, food skills and a lack of access to shops or equipment can play a role. Good nutrition supports both mental and physical health and is evidenced as positively impacting educational attainment in children.

Food-related deprivation is especially persistent amongst families with children across Ireland. A 2024 Barnardos report found that only 30% of Irish parents surveyed said they were never worried about feeding their children. The research showed that over the previous 12 months, 19% of parents felt they didn't have enough food to feed their children. This was an increase on the previously recorded number of 15% in January 2022.¹⁴ Governmental data also indicates that the proportion of people living in households experiencing food related deprivation increased between 2021 and 2024. One in five (22%) young people in Ireland say they have skipped meals due to cost. This peaks amongst 18 to 22-year-olds (29%). A further one in ten (10%) have taken out a loan to cover regular/monthly expenses.¹⁵

Food-related deprivation is especially persistent amongst families with children across Ireland.

Rising living costs in Ireland have impacted nearly all households, including working families who were previously financially secure. Those who are most disadvantaged remain in persistent hardship, with some reaching emotional breaking points and consistently relying on food banks to get by. Although food poverty is often not named directly (and 'food insecurity' is also little used in everyday conversations), stakeholders within Ireland's disadvantaged communities have observed all aspects of food insecurity, from anxiety about food to full-day hunger at the community level.

Research in Ireland has also indicated that stigma, pride and a lack of awareness surrounding support, prevents many from seeking help. Stakeholders surveyed called for more education, especially for parents, to address poor nutrition and obesity and to break cycles of unhealthy eating. The data also points to the fact that services may be most effective when delivered through existing trusted relationships, but that this demands long-term commitment and trust-building.

Research in Ireland has also indicated that stigma, pride and a lack of awareness surrounding support, prevents many from seeking help.

14 Barnardos (2024), "[*Food Insecurity in Ireland: Impact on children and their parents*](#)"

15 National Youth Council of Ireland (2024), "[*State of our young nation, a report into the lives of Irish 18 - 29 year olds*](#)"

Both Ireland's rural and urban areas experience food poverty with long-term disadvantaged groups most impacted. Food poverty is also increasingly encroaching on lower-income working households (driven by the cost-of-living crisis, fuel and food inflation, and housing pressures).

Policy context

The *Healthy Ireland Framework (2019 - 2025)* plays a foundational role in Ireland's policy response to food poverty and child food insecurity by embedding health and wellbeing into all aspects of its public policy and service delivery. Launched in 2013, and later extended through the *Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan (2021 - 2025)*, the framework follows a whole-of-government approach to improving health outcomes and reducing health inequalities. Currently due for renewal, the framework centres on prevention, early intervention, and addressing social determinants of health such as income, education, housing, and access to nutritious food. The Department of Health is currently reviewing existing policies alongside its new *Obesity Policy and Action Plan*, which is due to be released in 2026.

The *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028* provides a strategic, rights-based foundation for all child-related policies. Launched in 2023, it puts forward an approach for not only addressing food poverty through welfare or education programmes but also positions it as a core issue affecting children's wellbeing and equality. By establishing the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office, the framework enables coordinated, cross-departmental action on issues like nutrition and access to food and it has introduced tools such as Child and Youth Impact Assessments and Child Budgeting (which require all policies, including those related to food, to be evaluated for their impact on children). This framework complements initiatives like the School Meals Scheme, the Food Poverty Action Plan, and Healthy Ireland, seeking to ensure that child food insecurity is tackled through a joined-up, whole-of-government approach centring children's voices and rights.

Since 2021, Ireland has progressively taken a structured approach to addressing food poverty. A Food Poverty Working Group brought together government departments and civil society organisations to deliver a coordinated response. This led to the development of the *Food Poverty Action Plan (2024 - 2025)* outlining targeted interventions such as the Case Worker Pilot Programme, a scheme trialled in Dublin, Cork, and Limerick to provide tailored support to individuals experiencing food poverty. These efforts align with *Ireland's Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020 - 2025*, a national strategy aimed at reducing poverty and improving access to essential services including food.

In 2019, the European Commission announced the creation of a European Child Guarantee with a view to ensure every child in Europe who is at risk of poverty or social exclusion has access to basic rights, including nutrition. Through the European Child Guarantee, the Irish government commits to provide at least one healthy meal each school day to children in need by 2030.

Ireland's commitment to child nutrition is also reflected in its ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which obliges the State to ensure all children receive adequate nutrition. In the past, a key mechanism through which child food poverty has been addressed has been via the provision of school meals (and more recently through the introduction of the Summer Meals Programme).

Youth work

Youth work in Ireland is associated with opportunities for personal and social development, an improved sense of community, as well as social integration, practical skills, and positive behaviour. However, community support services are under severe strain in Ireland with rising demand outpacing capacity and concerns the most vulnerable are not being reached. Volunteers and staff are stretched highlighting a need for formal structures and improvements to resourcing to support staff, mitigating staff turnover and ensuring organisations can meet increased demand.

At the end of 2023, the Irish government published its commitment to young people and children in the form of its *Young Ireland: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023 - 2028* report. This policy framework set the context for a new National Strategy for Youth Work, prioritising collaboration with the youthwork sector. The Minister, Department, and youth work sector have expressed a focus on making sure that youth work services are delivered to a high quality, in accessible and inclusive ways so that:

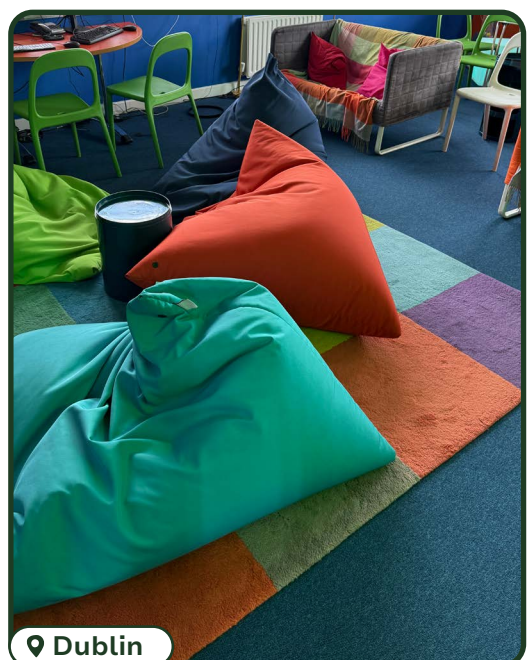
“young people from all backgrounds... fully realise their potential and positively shape their own and our shared future.”

Youth workers in Ireland are witnessing an increased demand for services. The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), the representative body for voluntary youth organisations in Ireland, describes this renewed demand as unsurprising given the 2022 census reported there were 1.02m people aged 10 to 24 in the Republic of Ireland (an increase of 13.7% on 2016). Despite this, 75% of NYCI members' survey respondents expressed feeling unequipped to respond to this increase.

To back youth workers in supporting young people to achieve their full potential and to address the multiple



Louth



Dublin

issues facing young people and the youth work sector, NYCI advised the Irish government to increase investment in the youth work sector by €15 million in the 2025 Budget. The organisation recommended that Budget 2025 provides a 13.5% increase in funding for *UBU: Your Place Your Space* (€6.5m), which provides out of school supports to young people, saying this is required to address the needs of young people most affected by deprivation and to maintain service continuity.¹⁶ Any future growth or development of the summer meals programme must be cognisant of existing sector capacity.

Importance of nutrition for young people

Nutritious food equips young people with essential nutrients that support good health, enhance well-being, and provide the energy needed for daily activities.¹⁷ From the age of five, children can follow the same healthy eating patterns as the rest of the household. However, their nutritional needs and appetites evolve as they grow, requiring age-appropriate adaptation.¹⁸ Adolescents (aged 10 - 24 years) and teenagers (aged 13 – 18 years) in particular experience rapid physical and developmental changes, requiring specific amounts of nutrients, with reference to adequate hydration, and minerals for bone health, muscle growth and brain development including calcium, vitamin D and iron.¹⁹ *The Food Safety Authority in Ireland (FSAI) workplan of the Scientific Committee (2021 – 2025)* includes the development of food based dietary guidelines for adolescents which will provide specific guidance to support the nuances of this age group on publication.²⁰

Dietary surveillance for young people in the UK and Ireland

Findings from *Ireland's National Food Surveys for Children (2017 – 2018)*²¹ and *Teens (2019 – 2020)*²² highlight a low intake of fruit and vegetables and dietary fibre (from bread, breakfast cereals, grains, fruit and vegetables) with an excess intake of saturated fat (from meat and meat products, spreading fats, discretionary foods e.g., biscuits and cakes), salt (from processed meat and bread) and free sugars (discretionary foods e.g., confectionery, biscuits, cakes and pastries and sugar-sweetened beverages), although the consumption of free sugars has reduced since 2005-06 following a preference for water over sugar-sweetened beverages.

16 National Youth Council of Ireland (2025). "[Pre-Budget Submission 2025](#)"

17 Safefood (2025) '[What does healthy food mean?](#)'

18 Safefood (2025), '[Healthy Eating, School Children](#)' and Health Service Executive (2016), '[Healthy Food for Life](#)'

19 Safefood (2025), '[Healthy Eating, Teenagers](#)'

20 Food Safety Authority of Ireland (2025), '[Work Plan of the Scientific Committee 2021 – 2025](#)'

21 IUNA [National Children's Food Survey II \(2017 – 2018\)](#) p2, 3

22 IUNA, '[National Teens' Food Survey II \(2019 – 2020\)](#)'

These findings align with the results of the UK National Diet and Nutrition Survey (2019–2023),²³ published in June 2025. This survey revealed that fewer than one in ten children in the UK aged 11 to 18 met government recommendations for fruit and vegetable intake, while 96% failed to achieve recommended fibre levels. Reduced intake of fruit and vegetables was attributed to factors such as limited availability and financial pressures associated with the cost of living. The consumption of saturated fat by children aged 18 months to 18 years exceeded UK government diet and nutrient objectives as a % of energy - 12.5% against the advised 10% of energy - and the average intake of free sugars was double recommended levels with 10.5% of energy for children, against the 5% of energy goal target.



The Food Standards Scotland cross-sectional study *Dietary Intake in Scotland's Children (DISH): An assessment of diets in children and young people aged 2 to 15 years living in Scotland, 2024*²⁴ identified similar dietary trends, with children of all ages failing to meet fruit and vegetable and fibre goals, with additional emphasis on the role of socioeconomic deprivation. Again, in the main, the consumption of saturated fat and free sugars exceeded dietary recommendations with young people aged 11 to 15 years recorded as consuming higher intakes of free sugars, 12% of energy, over twice the recommended goal of $\leq 5\%$. The study also reported heightened concerns among families about running out of food (44% of parents/guardians living in the most deprived areas - sample size 1700 young people/parents/guardians). Nearly 1/5 of respondents described coping strategies such as reducing portion sizes or skipping meals to ensure members of their family were fed.²⁵

Escalating food costs

The 2024 update of *Safefood's The cost of a healthy food basket in Ireland* highlights that households with teenagers need to spend 20% more on their weekly shop than households with younger children of pre-school or primary age, reflecting the rising cost of food as children grow. For families with teenagers reliant on social welfare, meeting the food component of the minimum essential standard of living would require approximately 33% of their household income.²⁶ The largest proportion of food costs are on basic staples including meat, bread and cereals, dairy products (milk, cheese), eggs and fruit and vegetables. Low-income households are often forced to compromise on elements of a healthy food basket to meet other expenses.²⁷

23 UK Government (2025), '[National Diet and Nutrition Survey 2019 to 2023:report](#)' (Main findings)

22 Food Standards Scotland (2025), '[Dietary Intake in Scotland's Children \(DISH\) research report](#)' p14/15

25 Food Standards Scotland (2025), '[Dietary Intake in Scotland's Children \(DISH\) research report](#)' p19/20

26 Safefood (2025), "[What is the cost of a Healthy Food Basket in Ireland in 2024](#)"

27 lbid

The community-led local development company Liffey Partnership, based in Dublin City, highlighted in their *2025 Addressing Food Poverty* report that 43% of local residents surveyed in Ballyfermot and Cherry Orchard were living in food poverty, and the cost of a complete shop at the local supermarket would require 45% of the weekly social welfare income for a family with one parent and two children.²⁸ This research also reported parents, particularly mothers, sacrificing their own diet to meet the needs of their families and the challenge of balancing food that is nutritious and within budget with what their children would eat, calling for support to increase young people's nutritional knowledge and cooking skills.²⁹

Prevalence of Overweight/Obesity

The most recent Irish Department of Agriculture, Food, and the Marine (DAFM) funded study into the prevalence of overweight/obesity (2022) noted that in 2020, 24% of adolescents (13 – 18 years) were living with overweight/ obesity compared with 18% in 2006 and 13% in 1990 ($p < 0.001$), with 41% of adolescents from lower affluence social class affected by overweight/ obesity, due to lack of choice and less financial freedom leading to an increased consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and foods of lower nutritional value.³⁰

The latest *Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (COSI)* in the Republic of Ireland reports the prevalence of overweight and obesity has stabilised since 2015. However, rates remain higher among older primary school children in comparison to younger children. A significant disparity is observed between children attending Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) (25%) and non-DEIS schools (16%), with the prevalence of overweight and obesity increasing with age among children in DEIS schools.³¹ The publication of these COSI round 6 results led to a call for young people to have access to healthy food and physical activity opportunities that are affordable at home and in their local communities.³²

Importance of nutrition education

The *Healthy weight for Ireland Obesity Policy and Action Plan 2016 – 2025* emphasises prevention as the means of achieving long-term change in young

28 Liffey Partnership (2025), '[Spinning Plates Addressing Food Poverty in Cherry Orchard and Ballyfermot](#)'

29 lbid

30 Moore Heslin A, O'Donnell A, Kehoe L, Walton J, Flynn A, Kearney J, McNulty B. '[Adolescent overweight and obesity in Ireland-Trends and sociodemographic associations between 1990 and 2020. *Pediatr Obes.*](#)' 2022 Feb;18(2)

31 Healthy Ireland (2024), '[The Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative \(COSI\) in the Republic of Ireland](#)'

32 Health Service Executive (2024), '[New research finds 1 in 5 primary school children living with overweight and obesity](#)'

people's health. The report highlights the important role families and communities play in promoting healthier eating behaviours through nutrition education on healthy food choices and lifestyle changes.³³ The report also identifies body image concerns and peer pressure as barriers to 'healthy' lifestyles, noting the role of the media in creating unrealistic expectations on how young people should look and the stigma surrounding eating disorders discouraging open conversations.³⁴

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report *'Health at glance: Europe 2024'* noted almost half (47%) of 15-year-olds in Ireland do not eat fruit or vegetables daily, with their consumption being strongly influenced by socio-economic status (family income, parental dietary habits and availability of fresh produce).³⁵ Countries such as Denmark, Germany, Spain and France have implemented targeted policies to promote fruit and vegetable consumption including nutrition education in schools and ensuring adequate provision within school meals.³⁶



In the UK, a partnership project 'Peas Please' is an initiative to increase vegetable consumption by young people, highlighting schools and holiday food provision as an opportunity to provide vegetables and/or salad with meals and establish gardens/ growing schemes to grow their own fruits and vegetables while being educated on their nutrition and health benefits.

Nutrition standards for school age provision

Nutrition standards applicable to the Summer Meals pilot for young people aged 10 – 18 years are based on the national framework from *Healthy Ireland, 'Healthy Food for Life food pyramid'*, developed by the Department of Health, *Safefood* and the Health Service Executive (HSE).³⁷ The food pyramid provides a pictorial representation of a balanced diet based on food groups depicted as shelves, guidance on food choices within each group/ shelf and age/ activity related quantities and frequency to provide sufficient nutrients and energy for health. In support of the national guidance, Healthy Ireland produced food plans for specific age groups (children age 5 - 12 years and 13 - 18 years) and individual food groups guidance including portion sizing, cooking tips and food hygiene.³⁸ Additional advice is provided on how to 'eat well', incorporating ideas for cooking with children from 3 years and upwards.³⁹

33 Healthy Ireland (2016–2025). "[A Healthy Weight for Ireland Obesity Policy and Action Plan](#)"

34 Ibid

35 OECD (2024), "[Health at Glance: Europe 2024 \(EN\)](#)"

36 Ibid

37 Irish Government (2019), '[The Food Pyramid](#)'

38 Irish Government (2019) '[Healthy Ireland Food Plans and Guides](#)';

Healthy Ireland (2016), '[Healthy eating, food safety and food legislation](#)'

39 Irish Government (2020), '[Eating Well](#)'



The food pyramid is the foundation for the 'Hot School Meals' standards as applied to the summer meals pilot programme, developed with the assistance of *Safefood* and the HSE, in cooperation with the Department of Social Protection which outlines the specific servings and quantities for meals across the food groups, for example 80g of cooked vegetables per meal.⁴⁰ Additional guidance is provided for school meals including standards for breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks and drinks, as applied to the provision of meals under the Department of Social Protection school meals scheme.⁴¹

An evaluation of the Irish School Meals Programme in 2022 by the Department of Social Protection highlighted that even with the requirement to adhere to nutrition and quality standards there was 'scepticism', particularly from parents, over participating schools meeting these requirements and an absence of monitoring to aid compliance.⁴² The concept of 'holiday hunger' was raised as a concern in the context of wider societal issues, such as cost of living and food poverty, with a need to support the most deprived children during the holiday period not only over summer but also the Christmas, Easter and mid-term breaks. However, the role of schools as a source of food outside of term-time was seen as a different model to term-time provision and requires access to school facilities (building keys, alarm codes etc.) outside of core hours and the continued support of external providers.⁴³

During the school meals programme parliamentary debate in February 2025, Dara Calleary (Minister for Social Protection) confirmed the allocation of funds to extend the 'Hot School Meals Scheme' to all primary schools in 2025.⁴⁴ During a follow up debate in April 2025, Colm Burke (Minister of State at the Department of Health) announced the appointment of a dietitian by the Department of Health from the Health Service Executive to review the current nutritional standards for 'Hot School Meals', including how these standards are being used in practice with the production of an audit mechanism for ongoing monitoring and compliance.⁴⁵ The UK Government are taking similar steps, announcing in June 2025 the expansion of eligibility for free school meals to all young people whose household is on Universal Credit, and the redistribution of fresh produce from farms to support communities and the revision of the school food standards, all under their 'Plan for Change' milestone to break down barriers to opportunity.⁴⁶

40 Healthy Ireland (2017), '[Nutrition Standards for Hot School Meals](#)'

41 Irish Government (2019), '[School Meals Scheme](#)'

42 Department of Social Protection (2022), "[Evaluation of the School Meals Programme](#)" pages 111/112

43 Department of Social Protection (2022), "[Evaluation of the School Meals Programme](#)" pages 4/90/118

44 Parliamentary Questions (5th February 2025), '[School Meals Programme](#)'

45 Parliamentary Questions (29th April 2025), '[School Meals Programme](#)'

46 UK Government (2025), '[Press Release – Free School Meals](#)'

Out of School Meal Provision (Ireland)

The Covid-19 pandemic led to concern about the impact of school closures on access to school meals in Ireland, particularly for pupils in disadvantaged areas. In response, emergency food parcels including bread and cereals, cold meats, dairy and fruit were delivered to pupils at home or for collection at schools, local charities and clubs using the allocated school meals funding.⁴⁷

Supermarket chains such as Tesco continue to support families over the summer school holidays with in-store food collections of non-perishable items for distribution through a network of Family Resource Centres to those in the local community.⁴⁸

The Children's Rights Alliance, through their Christmas Food Provision Scheme, provided funding to the Meath Women's Refuge and Support Service in 2024 to distribute vouchers for grocery shopping to 168 young people and 68 families (33 from ethnic minority, migrant backgrounds or members of the Roma and Traveller communities), heralded as providing a lifeline to those experiencing both domestic violence and food poverty during the Christmas holiday period.⁴⁹

These examples are isolated initiatives, and the announcement by the Minister for Education and Youth Helen McEntee regarding a summer meals pilot during Summer 2025 marks the first large scale government-funded programme specifically designed to support young people during the school holiday period, utilising existing youth work settings for food provision.⁵⁰ This pilot is the focus of the present independent research report.

Comparative holiday programmes are included within **Annex A**

47 Irish Government (2020), "[School Meals Programme – Guidance for Schools](#)"

48 Tesco Ireland (2024), "[Tesco Helps to Fight School Holiday Hunger in Ireland](#)"

49 Children's Rights Alliance (2025). "[Best Practice in Addressing Food Poverty](#)"

50 Irish Government (2025), "[Minister Health McEntee welcomes new Summer Meals Pilot to help tackle holiday hunger](#)"

Chapter 4: Prevalence of holiday hunger

Introduction



One of the key objectives of the evaluation was to establish the prevalence of holiday hunger amongst the young people impacted by the pilot. In this chapter, we set out our findings in this respect, drawing on evidence gathered during site visits in summer 2025, from surveys undertaken and other evidence provided by projects funded through the pilot. The chapter also describes some of the different approaches taken across sites to tackle holiday hunger.

Photo (top) Carlow (bottom) Dublin

Perceived level of need for the pilot

Across all sites visited, youth workers identified food insecurity as a tangible, if uneven, presence. When understanding and responding to food hunger, workers relied on informal knowledge and relationships with young people and their families - a core part of the youth work approach. Most workers interviewed during the site visits believed that food poverty and holiday hunger affected the majority of the young people and families they supported. The cost-of-living crisis was often referred to by workers, with one noting that,

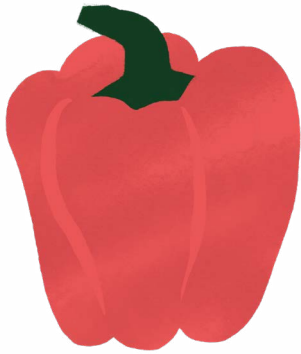
“the price of a bag of shopping has doubled in recent times”.

Moreover, it was noted that summer was a time of particular pressure on household finances. As one worker explained,

“Our families only have a small amount of money week-on-week and that’s the case across the whole year. Bills still have to be paid whether its summer or not. So, summer holidays bring an additional pressure and anxiety for parents who need to find money for food for children who would normally be fed at school”.

None of the sites visited formally measured or explicitly assessed food poverty. However, most staff were able to give qualitative indicators of holiday hunger, for example young people arriving hungry, skipping meals, asking for seconds, or asking discreetly for food to take home. However, youth workers were cautious in their approach to leftovers, offering to all attendees at the end of group sessions.





“We’d just say, ‘We’ve got leftovers, do you want them?’ so no one felt singled out.”

In addition, as shown in the Figure below, 60% of respondents to the Youth Service Worker survey felt there was a high level of need for the Summer Holiday Meals Programme amongst young people in their local area (38% medium level of need, 2% not sure).

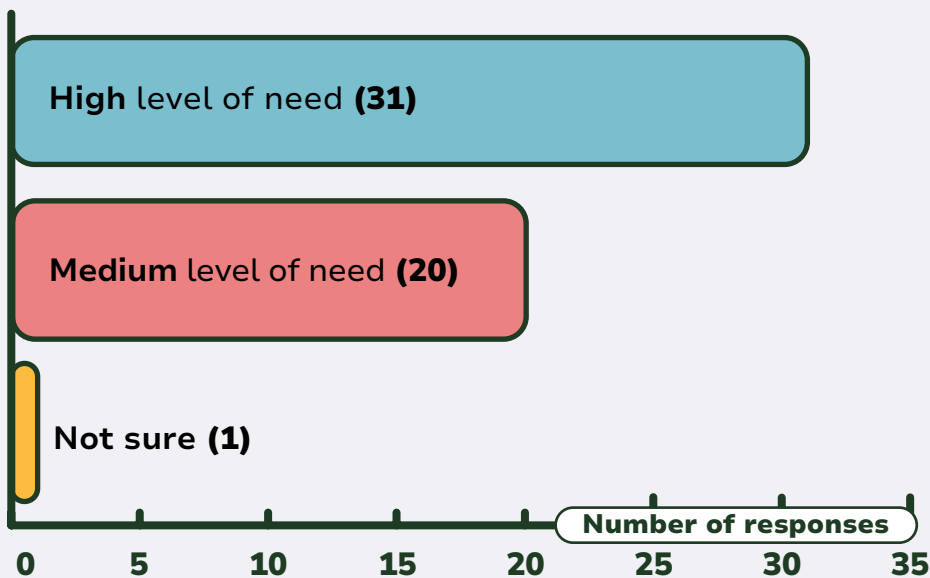


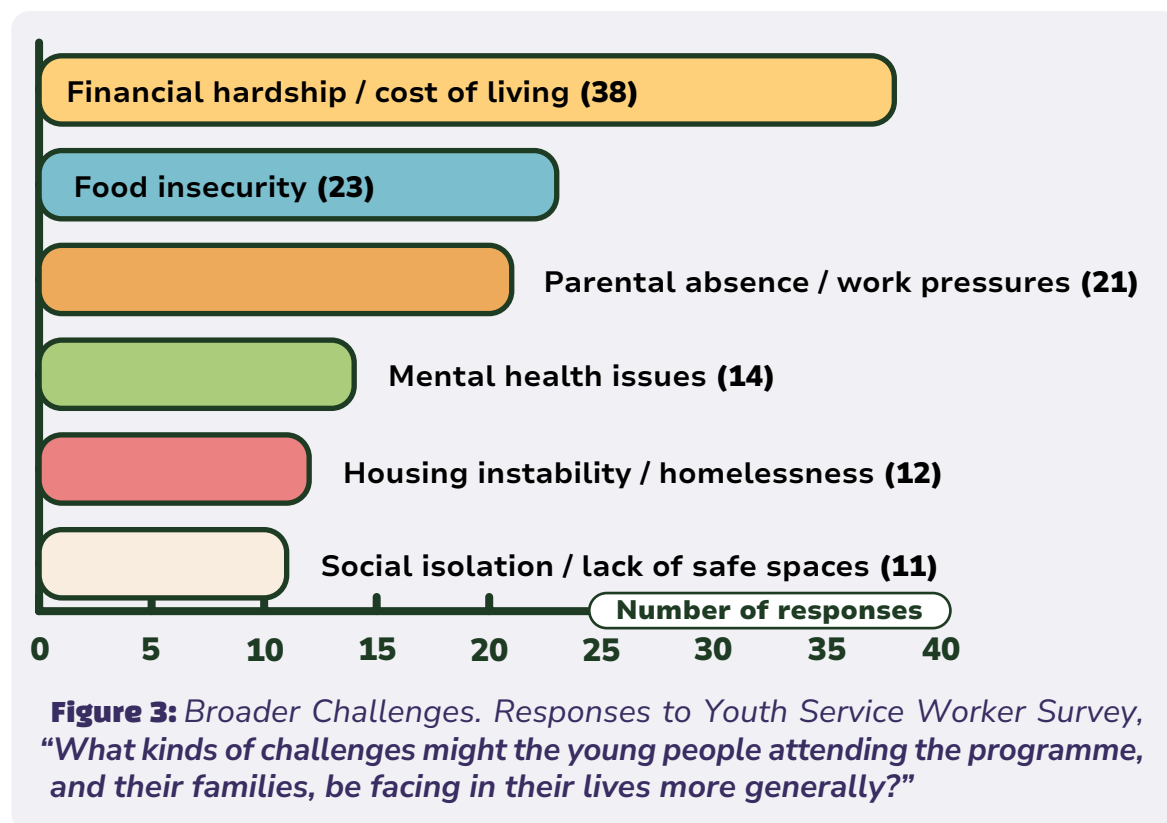
Figure 2: Perceived level of Need. Responses to Youth Service Worker Survey, “What do you feel the level of need is for the Summer Holiday Meals programme amongst young people in your local area?”

With regards to the broader challenges faced by the young people attending the Summer 2025 Meals Programme, survey respondents described a wide range of issues, with financial hardships and food insecurity emerging as the most commonly cited challenges.

“A number of families that engage with our service are trying to survive on low income wages/ social welfare payments. Some families struggle to pay household bills and as a result are struggling to achieve a minimum standard of living.”



A summary of the most common challenges cited by respondents are provided in **Figure 3** below.



These findings were also reflected in feedback provided by staff across different youth sites at the end of the pilot. Staff at one site, for example, reflected that

“a number of parents came up to us on streets thanking us for the food [...] many said they were really worried what they going to do when school holidays are on, money is just not there [...] summer meals really took a lot of stress and worry off families.”

The staff further felt there was

“definitely a need [...] some young people can be hungry during the day and when they go home, some [have] no cooking facilities or no money for food or electricity, it really is happening....some low-income families, see fruit and vegetables as a delicacy rather than a daily requirement”.

Feedback gathered from young people over the course of the evaluation via the Young People’s Survey and Topic Guide also pointed towards a high level of need amongst those reached by the pilot. One respondent to the survey, for example, commented that

“my parents won’t have enough money to get us treats or nice meals”.



Another young person shared that

“my family is delighted I am getting food [at the youth club], it takes the pressure off my granny, she’s happy that I am getting a dinner, it costs a lot for shopping”; with another stating that “my friends don’t know I’m hungry, we all eat together and chose from the menu.”

Stakeholders across Ireland’s policy community working in areas relevant to children and young people, interviewed as part of the evaluation, also echoed the sense of holiday hunger being a real and prevalent issue in Ireland, and consequently of there being a high level of need for the pilot.

“We have seen from our own work [...] there are children who during the holiday period do not have access to food [...] during the summertime as well, there are long periods of time where children are not being guaranteed that hot meal that they get in school. We think it’s really a significant issue.”

“We hear from our members young people [are] coming in, bringing food home to their families and we’ve seen it in member surveys: food bills for services have gone up because there’s so much more demand for food. So having some kind of scheme in place around dealing with holiday hunger is definitely welcome.”

With regards to the drivers behind food poverty and holiday hunger, one stakeholder explained that

“...for many families, [lack of income] may be one aspect. But there are other drivers there - what we have been really struck by in our work is the fact that issues like domestic violence, mental health and addiction can be real contributors to the issue of food poverty.”

Insecure housing and homelessness were also highlighted as impacting upon many families’ cooking facilities, leading to families being

“..stuck in a situation where they’re having to buy takeaway food that’s really costly. It’s going to impact on their income or [their] ability to store, prepare or cook food.”



Stakeholders working for ETBs likewise indicated that holiday hunger was a real issue in the areas in which they operated. As put by one ETB interviewee:

“It’s hard to kind of quantify the nature of child poverty or hunger during the summer period, but among the cohorts that our projects work with, you would have had a lot of people going hungry during the summer because that’s their reality at home.”

As a result, the interviewee felt that the pilot was

“definitely a good fit for those people [...] I think we did well in the numbers that we achieved, the numbers of meals that were given out and the participation and the consumption show that there was a need for it.”

Approaches to measuring and tackling holiday hunger

While there was a strong sense of holiday hunger being a real and prevalent issue in Ireland amongst those engaged with through the evaluation, some also cited a lack of numerical or quantitative data evidencing the full extent of the problem. As put by one stakeholder who had spent time at multiple pilot sites:

“It’s fair to say that we have learned that there is food poverty out there, and food insecurity [...] was more prevalent than I thought it was. I’ve no way at this point of measuring it, but I’m surprised at how much of an issue it was and certainly anecdotally how [much] this initiative was addressing it.”

Some of the difficulty in fully assessing the prevalence of holiday hunger was attributed to food poverty being something that can be

“conceptually hard to picture, if you’ve not experienced it [...] the idea of a young person who is in school, who has friends, who is ticking all different kind of boxes in terms of their life. But when they get home there isn’t a meal there or it’s hit and miss [...] or they’re grabbing a chocolate bar or they’re going to a petrol station.”

In accordance with others who participated in the evaluation, the stakeholder felt that the Summer Meals Pilot has

“pulled out the issue out of the shadows a little bit for the likes of me, [who are] not working with young people [...] it seems to me that it has confirmed its prevalence.”

In some of the sites visited as part of the evaluation, food packs were offered to all young people at the end of the day, so those in need could take them home without attention. Some clubs reported that the food provided was the

only reliable meal for certain attendees, particularly for those who were living in chaotic home environments where parents were perhaps out of the house for large parts of the day or did not have the means to cook substantial and nutritious meals. As one worker pointed out:

“We knew the family had nothing in – dad lost his job – so we brought over a couple of dinners and extra bread and milk.”

When asked about this way of working, a number of workers shared that those moments often led to the young person being referred for additional support. It was also stated by a number of the workers during the fieldwork, that often the only reason some young people came to the club over the summer was for the food. Staff at a number of the sites visited noted that there had been an increase in the numbers wanting to attend the summer clubs from previous years. While some workers reported that some of this was down to the offer of food, it has also had the effect of reconnecting youth workers with young people they had not seen for a while. As one worker explained,

“We’re finding that we often lose young people when they reach 15 or 16 but I’ve noticed that this summer, some of them have come back, looking to see what food is available.”

Another worker shared her experience:

“There is a group of lads we know who come here from playing football about five kilometres away. They come as they know they’ll get chicken, mash and gravy. It means we can chat to them and encourage them to come here for things we do, like the football we have here.”

Of those sites who had not seen an increase in numbers from previous years, it was reported that the food provided had other benefits, including greater engagement in activities once fed, better concentration, increased interest in nutrition, and not wanting to go out to the shops during sessions to get food. This is discussed further in the next chapter.

The sites visited sought to tackle holiday hunger in a tactful way, and it was reported that some young people were saving food for siblings. Despite this, some workers acknowledged the difficulty in knowing the full extent of need, given the reluctance of young people to openly discuss hunger. In one site, with a rule in place that younger children could not attend, one 10-year-old boy arrived. The worker had to phone his parents to collect him. The worker explained,

“It’s hard but if we let under 10s come, there would be hundreds coming next week for the food.”

When workers were asked what feedback they had received from parents in relation to the provision of food, a consistent reply was that parents felt relief.

It was noted on a number of occasions that knowing their children were safe, were getting a hot meal and were occupied, took a lot of anxiety away as they would not be able to afford such high-quality hot food, or could not afford the money for day trips and other expenses.

However, only one of the sites visited undertook systematic measurement. At this site, each young person was given a token on arrival and the catering manager when presented with the token by the young person, discreetly noted on the back the name of the child. That allowed the manager to track who was coming forward for food.

A few sites used food delivery to reach families on Traveller sites or in Roma communities. Strong pre-existing relationships with vulnerable families made it easier for young people and parents to speak more openly about their needs. This often led to young people being encouraged to attend the clubs and, in a few cases, extra food being dropped off to families, particularly where it was known that young people could not attend the service, for whatever reason.

One worker explained:

“We’d drop meals to the house for a young lad whose mum was unwell – it was a way of checking in without making it feel formal.”

Another said:

“It’s not really in our remit to be delivery drivers, but for the summer, with the funding, we could make it work.”

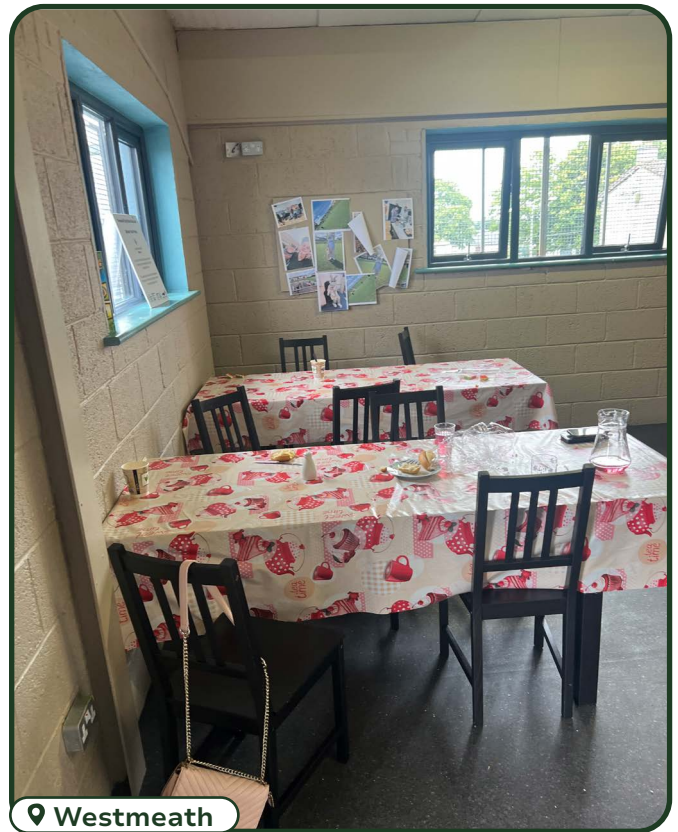
In some rural areas, staff noted the logistical challenge but still made the effort for families they knew were struggling:

“If they can’t come to us, we’ll go to them. Even if it’s just sandwiches and fruit – it keeps the connection.”

“We’d bring the meals into the site, chat to the parents, and see who wanted to come up to the centre the next day.”

This was often as much about building trust and relationships as it was about immediate nutrition. However, one worker in a rural area noted that travel time and costs made home delivery selective.

“You can’t do it for everyone – we’d end up spending all day in the car.”



Food Waste

As will be discussed in more detail below, youth workers considered food waste to be a particular issue at the beginning of the programme. However, food waste did not appear to be an issue in any of the sites visited as part of this evaluation.

“Kids happy to ring home and tell mum there’s leftovers – a nice way of reducing stigma and giving mum her place.”

While some staff noted that this technically *“breaks the rules,”* it was widely acknowledged as an effective practice for reducing both waste and household food insecurity.



Photo © Dublin

Conclusion

- 🍎 Food insecurity and holiday hunger were widely recognised as significant issues by almost all young people engaged in the programme. Most youth workers reported a high level of local need for the Summer Meals Pilot.
- 🍎 The cost-of-living crisis and rising food prices were frequently cited during site visits as major factors increasing pressure on household finances and contributing to food insecurity.
- 🍎 Survey data identified food insecurity and financial hardship as the most common challenges affecting young people and their families, alongside mental health issues and housing instability.
- 🍎 Sites participating in the evaluation used qualitative and informal indicators to gauge holiday hunger. These included observing how often young people arrived at youth clubs hungry or asked to take food home for their families.
- 🍎 These observations informed sensitive and inclusive approaches to tackling holiday hunger, such as offering leftovers to all young people or inviting anyone who wished to take food home - helping to reduce stigma and normalise food support.

Chapter 5: Impact on nutritional intake

Introduction

Another aim guiding the evaluation was to assess the impact of the pilot on the nutritional intake and wellbeing of the participating young people. This chapter sets out key findings in this area with regards to food preferences and dietary needs; baseline dietary habits and the menu options provided in relation to current nutrition standards. Following on from the nutritional impact, **Chapter 6** provides an assessment of wellbeing and participation-related impacts identified over the course of the evaluation.

Food preferences and dietary needs of participants

When looking at nutritional approaches across sites, it is important to recognise that the typical daily diets of some young people attending are likely to be lacking in nutritional quality and follow 'irregular' eating patterns. As workers observed,

“They often have energy drinks, vapes, and ultra-processed noodles.”

“Young people’s food preferences are different than healthy guidelines, sometimes young people only getting up out of bed and eating a dinner as breakfast.”

Indeed, half of the respondents to the Youth Service Worker Survey expected to experience challenges in relation to young people’s food preferences and/or dietary needs over the course of the pilot, making this the most commonly identified challenge (see **Figure 4**).

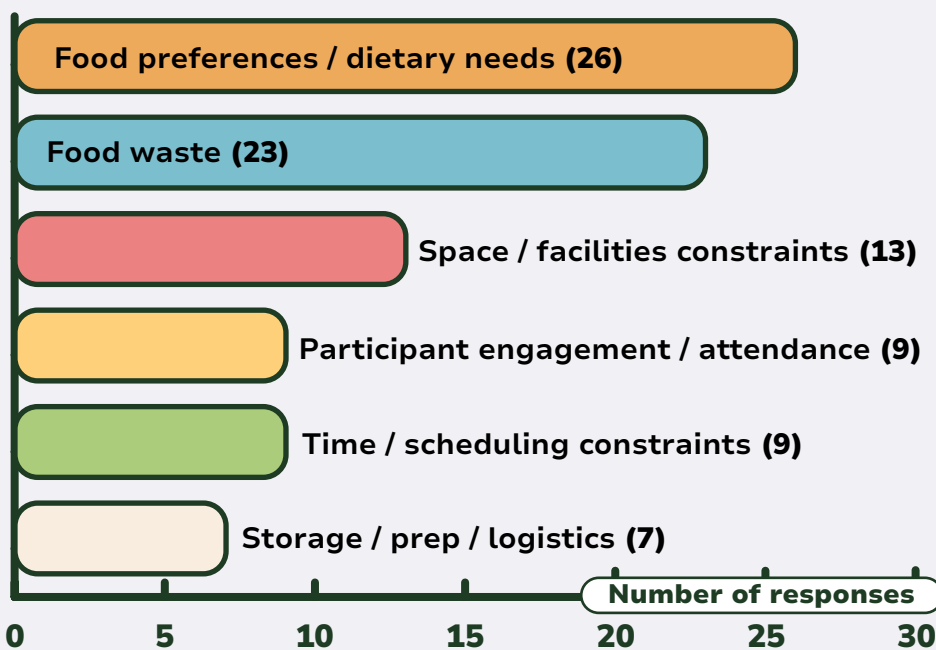


Figure 4: Thematic summary of most common responses to Youth Service Worker Survey, “What challenges do you foresee (e.g. time, space, food waste, participant engagement, young people’s food preferences)?”

Conducting a food frequency questionnaire (FFQ) early in the pilot within the young person's survey provided a means of establishing baseline diets and food preferences from a sample of those attending the youth projects during summer 2025. **Findings from the results of the food frequency questionnaire were:**

→ **Less than 10% of respondents were consuming sufficient fruit, salad and vegetables** to meet the recommended seven portions a day for post-primary school children to gain the full benefit of having a range of vitamins, minerals and a varied sources of fibre daily;



→ **All the respondents were consuming less than the five dairy portions (e.g. milk, cheese, yoghurts)** recommended for young people aged 9 – 18 years which may impact bone density in later years, increasing the risk of conditions such as osteoporosis;



→ Fish is recommended in the diet up to twice a week with at least one being an oily fish, such as salmon, mackerel or anchovies. **Around half of respondents reported never eating fish (excluding oily fish) and over 60% never have oily fish**, which limits these foods as a source of Omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin D, and other micronutrients such as B vitamins, iodine, zinc, iron, selenium and calcium which support brain development, bone health, muscle development, reduced risk of heart disease in later life, amongst other health benefits;



→ **Bread or similar items (roll, wrap, pita etc.) were the most frequently consumed carbohydrate**, eaten daily by over 60% of respondents while porridge or cereal was the least popular carbohydrate with 29% stating they 'never' eat these items, potentially reflecting alternative breakfast choices or a tendency to skip breakfast;



→ **Over half the respondents (56%) were consuming fizzy or sugar-sweetened beverages daily**, while nearly one-third (32%) consumed sweets, chocolate or ice-cream every day;



→ **Fast food items were consumed either once a day or more than once a day by 11% of respondents** with the most common frequency being 1 – 2 times per week by 40% of respondents;



→ **20% of respondents consumed salty snacks** (e.g., pretzels, salted nuts, salted popcorn) and 22% included processed meats (e.g., sausages, bacon or ham) at least once a day. These items are recommended to be limited within the Irish Food Pyramid due to being higher in saturated fat/ salt.



The survey also found that just over half (53%) respondents met Irish Government guidelines for physical activity levels, while under half (43%) did so for participation in strength exercises. A full breakdown of responses to the young people's survey can be found within **Annex D**.

The survey findings highlight potential gaps in young people's diets, consistent with the literature, presenting valuable opportunities to improve diet quality over the holidays. Youth services visited for the evaluation were aware of nutrition standards regularly offering water, unsweetened fruit juice, fruit, vegetables, salad, dairy portions (e.g. milk, cheese, yoghurts), and sources of protein, including fish, chicken and beef. Introducing breakfast/ brunch as a regular meal option, and eating routines, adapted to the day's activities, were also found to support a change in eating patterns. In addition, providing access to regular food, sites found young people were less likely to leave during sessions to visit local shops for energy drinks, sweets, and fast foods and were actively requesting healthier options such as mash over chips or water over carbonated drinks.

"The camp models healthy eating [...] giving space for young people to explore and make good choices, no one is asking for fizzy drinks - kids who drink Monster are having water or those normally eating unhealthy food are asking for fruit."

"Young people arrive for breakfast and are still at the youth club at dinner time, they know there are egg rolls waiting for them, so they get out of bed"

Trying new foods

One youth worker survey respondent explained that *"many young people do not have the confidence to try new foods, they take a while to adjust to 'healthy' alternatives"*, while another stated that *"the food preferences of young people will always be challenging, we try to offer a wide range of food choice whilst being mindful of waste and avoiding same."*

In addition, as summarised by one policy stakeholder,

"You need to make sure young people are being provided with proper food, healthy foods that meets the nutrition guidelines. But then you have to make sure on the other side of the coin that you have cultural sensitivity, relevance [and] that the meal choices that you're providing don't lead to disengagement."



Against this backdrop, staff in the summer meals programme often took a pragmatic approach - balancing the provision of nutritious food with ensuring it was something young people would actually eat. As another worker noted,

"Our young people don't have a sophisticated palate."

Often, however, youth workers overwhelmingly reported that the pilot was successful in introducing young people to new foods, in turn helping broaden their diets. As staff at one site reflected at the end of the pilot, it is a

“huge challenge with young people to try new things/change – some young people felt comfortable to take the step, in some cases [it was] a real leap of faith but they did it.” In some cases, the young people who tried new things “loved the new foods, asked for it again [and are] going to tell mam and family to buy.”

Involving young people

In nearly all sites visited, whether meals were prepared onsite or brought in, workers applied a practical youth work approach to promoting better nutrition. In sites with cooking facilities, this often meant involving young people in every stage - from planning the menu and shopping for ingredients, to preparing, cooking, eating together and clearing away afterwards. Even where food was bought in, young people often provided feedback, and workers worked with caterers to adapt meals accordingly. In at least two sites, catering providers were replaced after young people rejected the quality of the food. A summary of the most common ways in which meals were integrated sites' youth work activities (based on responses to the Youth Service Worker survey) is provided in the **Figure 5** below.

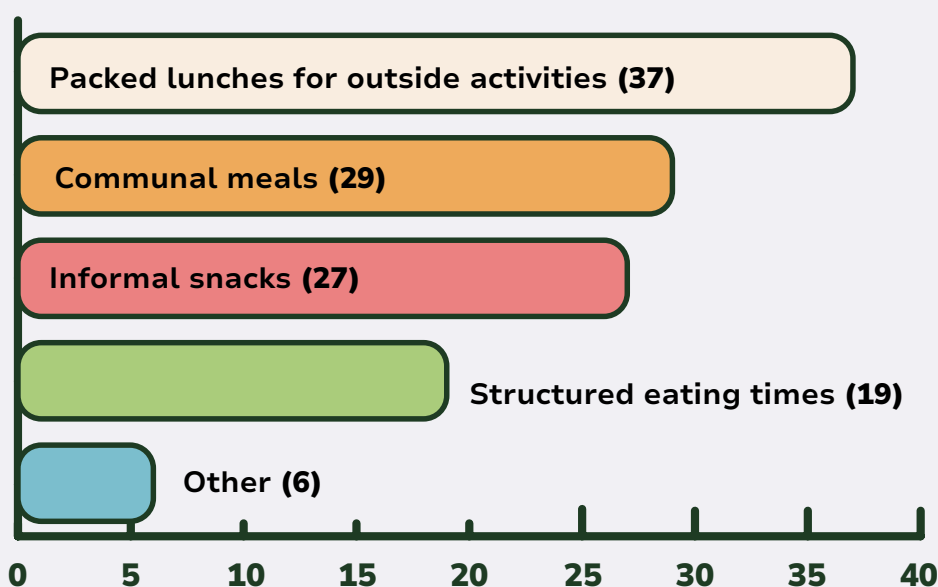


Figure 5: Responses to Youth Service Worker Survey, “How will meals be integrated into your youth work activities?”

Youth work settings

According to many of the workers who gave feedback on the site visits, the food provision within broader youth work activities helped strengthen relationship-building, learning, and life skills. As one youth workers said.

“That is the young work tradition of working. You don’t instruct young people to eat healthy foods. You provide opportunities for them to experiment and make good choices”. Another worker said,

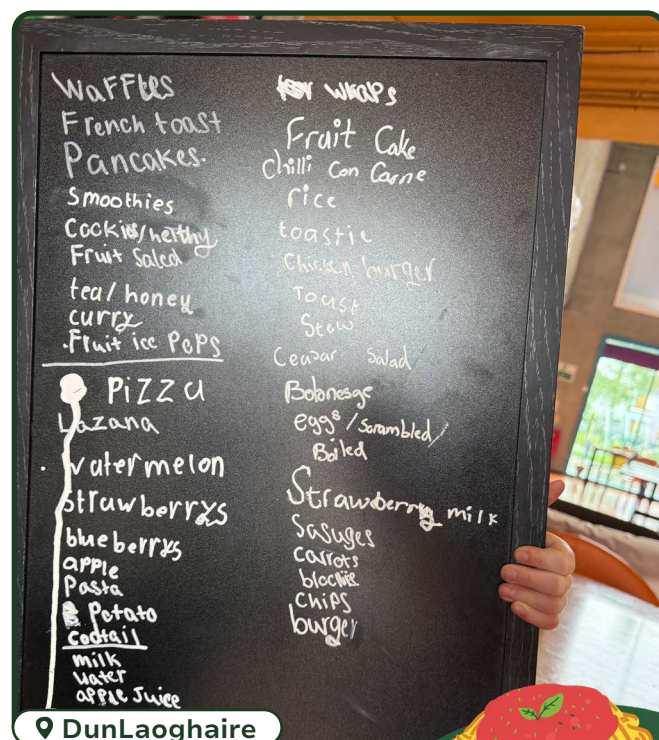
“We provide opportunities for young people to try new things - it’s up to them whether they take them.”

A further staff member reflected at the end of the pilot that the provision of food in turn created space and opportunities for discussions related to nutrition, food preparation and healthy meals, explaining that

“eating together gave a great opportunity to have general conversations, fun conversations over food but also [provided] an opportunity to discuss food while actually enjoying food, the importance of healthy food – it became a real thing when chatting and enjoying food, not just something from a book or classroom.”

Menu options

When preparing menus for the summer meals provision participating Youth Services were advised to follow the Healthy Ireland Nutrition Standards for Hot School Meals⁵¹, the Nutrition Standards for School Meals⁵², and the Irish Food Pyramid.⁵³ These guidelines provide the foundation for nutritious meals (hot and cold), snacks and beverages. However, as discussed, programme stakeholders also recognised that young people need to be met where they are in relation to their preferred foods, sensory needs, dietary habits and requirements in relation to allergies, intolerances, cultural diets or lifestyle choices to encourage nutritional intake. While also appreciating that they are on their summer break and would welcome foods which are higher in fat, salt and sugar as a ‘treat’ on certain days.



51 Irish Government (2019), [“Nutrition Standards for Hot School Meals”](#)

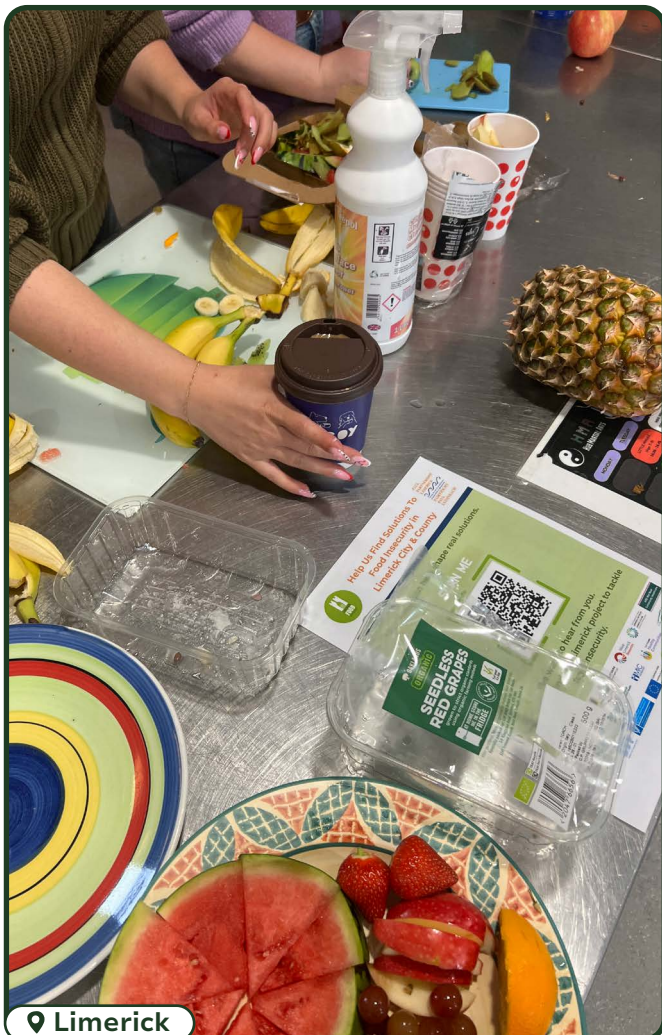
52 Irish Government (2019), [“Nutritional Standards for School Meals”](#)

53 Irish Government (2019), [“The Food Pyramid”](#)

Foods and beverages provided by youth services

The table overleaf summarises the foods and beverages provided by the participating youth services. Items are categorised as either **core** or **non-core**, based on the national dietary guidelines noted previously. This classification offers a simplified framework for comparing foods that aligned with nutrition standards (**core foods**) versus those included occasionally for specific meals, activities, events or locations (**non-core foods**), as used when evaluating the Children in Northern Ireland's Summer Holiday Provision.⁵⁴

Menus incorporated a rotation of foods including new foods to try, providing opportunities for young people to explore and become familiar with new foods such as pineapple, peppers, green beans, avocado and baby corn, either on their own or incorporated into dishes such as a soup, curry, pasta or a stir-fry.



54 Northumbria University (2019), *'An Evaluation of Children's in Northern Ireland's Summer 2019 Holiday Provision'*



Core Foods



Water / Milk / Fresh Fruit Juice / Fresh Smoothies

Fruit (Bananas, Apples, Oranges, Pineapple, Peaches, Kiwi, Grapes, Watermelon, Mango, Strawberries, Blueberries and Raspberries)

Vegetables (Peppers, Corn, Peas, Carrots, Broccoli, Aubergine, Courgette, Turnip, Cabbage, Mushrooms, Baby Corn, Spring onions, included in Gyozas)

Chicken or Turkey Roast/fillet (Curry, Fajita's, Stir-fry, Cesar Salad, Casserole, Shawarma)

Beef steak (Stew, Burgers, Cottage Pie, Shepherd's Pie, Chilli-Con Carne, Meatballs)

Eggs (Boiled, Scrambled, Air Fried, French Toast)

Pasta (Lasagna, Carbonara, Bolognaise, Napoli (with / without chicken), Bake)

Potatoes (Boiled, Baked, Cubed, Skins, Wedges)

Wholemeal Sandwiches or Toastie / Wraps (Tuna, Chicken, Cheese – some with salad and/or mayonnaise and used as pizza bases)

Salad plate (Chicken, Egg, Cheese e.g., Feta, with coleslaw, cucumber, tomatoes)

Soup (Vegetable broth)

Cultural dishes (Sushi / Raman)

Homemade snacks (Granola bars)

Hummus with crackers or carrot/cucumber sticks

Yoghurts (pots or included in 'Acai' bowls with fruits, seeds and granola)



Non-Core Foods



Battered/breaded (Chicken or fish goujons)

Pastry items (Sausage Roll)

Processed Meats (Ham, Sausages and Bacon)

White cereals and breads (Brioche Rolls, Garlic Bread, Bruschetta, Pizza bases)

Chips (including 'Spice Bags' with chicken, onion and spice)

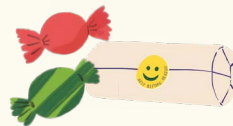
Honey (in tea) / **Syrup** (on French Toast)

Desserts (Tiramisu, ice cream & toppings)

Baked Goods (Fruit or Madeira Cake / Scones / Biscuits)

Baking sessions (Pancakes, Cookies, Brownies, Cheesecake)

Prepared Snacks (Cereal Bars / Popcorn / Crisps / Tortilla Chips)



Purchased by young people at local shops:

Energy Drinks

Sweets

Instant Noodles

Chocolate Spread

Take-away items (Burgers, Spice Bags)

While nutritious meals were appreciated, young people also valued the inclusion of familiar comfort foods. Comments such as *“I like when we get chips with the healthy stuff”* and *“Can we have nuggets sometimes as well?”* reflected a desire for balance. Staff acknowledged this, noting that occasional inclusion of preferred familiar items helped sustain engagement and prevented disengagement from the programme’s food offer. Some sites deliberately alternated menus between ‘treat’ occasion days and fully balanced meals to maintain interest while still promoting healthier eating habits.

Young people’s reflections on taste and quality reinforced the importance of freshness, presentation, and involvement in preparation. Statements such as *“The pasta was unreal – can we have that again?”* and *“Fruit’s nice when it’s cold and cut up”* suggested that meals and snacks were well received when prepared attractively. One young person noted, *“I like it when we make it ourselves – it tastes better,”* echoing staff reports that youth involvement in preparation increased satisfaction.

Taken together, these perspectives indicate strong alignment between what young people valued and what staff observed as effective practice, within effective youth work. The qualitative evidence collected from the sites suggests that the combination of quality ingredients, thoughtful presentation, youth involvement, and a balanced approach between nutritious and familiar options contributed to the programme’s success in promoting healthier eating habits.

Young people were asked by researchers and youth workers what they would eat if they were not at the club or what foods they buy when they visit the shops themselves. Responses included rolls and chocolate spread, crisp sandwiches, noodles and white bread, pic ‘n’ mix and energy drinks.

Workers noted that some young people were attending clubs having had no breakfast or having to fend for themselves when parents go to work, with one site commenting that *“those attending are likely to have takeaway foods at weekends as there is nothing else in the fridge”* while another reflected... *“they won’t have money for Sunday dinner, and that’s a must in Ireland, so it’s appreciated”*.

“I like when we get chips with the healthy stuff”
- Young person



“I like it when we make it ourselves – it tastes better”
- Young person

“they won’t have money for Sunday dinner, and that’s a must in Ireland, so it’s appreciated.”
- Worker

Conclusion

- Many young people attending youth services were starting from a low nutritional baseline, with limited intake of fruit, vegetables, dairy, and fish (oily fish), and frequent consumption of foods high in fat, salt, and sugar. Skipped meals and irregular eating patterns were also common.
- The summer meals programme helped address these gaps by offering regular, nutritious meals and snacks aligned with national nutrition standards.
- Food provision followed a “meeting young people where they are” approach, recognising individual preferences and experiences. Some young people preferred familiar foods, while others were eager to try new flavours, spicier options, or foods from different cultures.
- Non-core items such as cereal bars, sausage rolls, chips and desserts were also offered to accommodate preferences, reflect relaxed holiday routines, and used as ‘treats’ on celebration days.
- Individual youth projects adopted varied strategies to balance nutritional quality with appeal. Sharing ideas, resources, and lessons learned across services will be important for the programme’s future success.
- Ongoing efforts should also focus on involving young people in decision-making, shopping, food preparation, communal eating, and initiatives to reduce food waste.
- Overall, evidence indicates that the pilot positively influenced dietary habits, helping to reduce skipped meals and the purchase of high-fat, salt, and sugary foods and drinks. Structured meal routines encouraged healthier eating patterns, particularly as many young people stayed at the youth clubs throughout the day - from breakfast through to dinner.

Chapter 6: Wellbeing-related impacts of the pilot

Introduction

This chapter sets out the evaluation’s findings with regards to the wellbeing-related impacts of the pilot. This includes the analysis of youth workers’ initial expectations around the impact of the pilot; evidence gathered from site visits, focus groups with young people and other sources of feedback provided by the pilot sites; and case studies describing the activities and methods of food provision utilised by particular youth services involved in the delivery of the pilot.

Expectations and impacts of the pilot

67% of respondents to the Youth Service Worker Survey expected the pilot would have a “**large impact**” on young people’s wellbeing, with 28% expecting a moderate impact and 2% a small impact.

Respondents identified a variety of ways in which access to meals was expected to support young people’s wellbeing - the most frequently mentioned related to improved nutrition, social connection, and reduced stress on families.

These initial expectations can be compared with the evidence gathered throughout the evaluation, which indicates that many of these anticipated benefits were realised in practice.



Nutrition and physical health

Better nutrition and physical health, with access to reliable, nutritious meals leading to reduced hunger and healthier diets

“Nutrition is so important for maintaining both positive physical and mental wellbeing [...] young people who don’t receive nutritious meals otherwise will deeply benefit from this scheme.”

“I am more willing to try new foods in the projects than at home, I know I love fruit but never had much variety of them before to try - I am eating healthier”
(Focus group participant, Kildare)

“Some young people admitted that they hadn’t tried vegetables before in their lives and now feel like they have been missing out as they loved the taste of vegetables in the different meals.”
(Youth worker feedback, Sligo)

“Young people are asking for ‘proper chicken’ not nuggets, they are enjoy having roast beef and asking to have salad served separately”
(Site visit feedback, Cork)

“These are kids who probably eat takeaways at weekend and nothing else in the fridge” (Site visit feedback, Dublin/DunLaoghaire)

“They won’t have money for a Sunday dinner, and that’s a must in Ireland so, it’s appreciated” (Site visit feedback, Cork)



Mood and mental wellbeing

Improved mood and mental wellbeing, with access to meals helping to reduce anxiety and stress while improving mood and confidence

“Feeling secure in knowing there will always be a meal throughout the day has a profound psychological impact on young people as they can be in a constant state of fight, flight and survival.”

“To have the worry of where the food for the day is coming from removed from the young person’s mind absolutely improves their wellbeing”

“It is something she also looks forward to and she doesn’t have to worry about packing her own food” (Feedback gathered from young person, Cork)

“I really look forward to getting my lunch here every day ... makes a difference ... It makes me feel good” (Young person, Dublin)

“Children were happier, more energetic, and more engaged in summer activities. Youth workers noticed improved mood and participation” (site visit observations, Cork)

“Children are showing confidence and engagement – they have the freedom to explore and learn – they seem to relish it” (site visit feedback, Limerick)

Youth Worker expectations

Impact evidence

Concentration and readiness

Increased concentration and readiness to engage in other activities

“If young people have nutritious food, they will be able to concentrate and engage in the programme without being hungry”

“Feel more energetic” (Young person, Longford and Westmeath)

“When young people are hungry it impacts their mood, attitude and concentration.” (site visit feedback, Wexford)

“Attendance is getting better over the summer, some kids know this is their only meal.” (site visit feedback, Tipperary)

“There are less of them asking to go out to the shops for snacks. I really think food had a big part of motivation, taking part, turning up in the mornings.” (site visit feedback)

Financial stress on families

Reduced financial stress on families, with positive consequences for the wellbeing of young people at home

“It will also alleviate financial strain on low income families and this can also promote better family relationships.”

“My family are delighted I am getting food here.... It takes the pressure off my granny She’s happy that I am getting a dinnerit cost a lot for shopping” (Young person, Dublin)

“Saves us money.” (Young person, Lough and Meath)

“We don’t have to pay for it either – that is a massive difference” (Young person, Donegal)

“Parents initially wary of agreeing to their kids coming to camps. But when they realise it was free and there was food for the kids, they were relieved” (site visit feedback, Limerick)

“Feedback from parents is generally around relief. It’s something they don’t have to worry about over the summer” (site visit feedback, Dublin)





The Pecco Food Menu
 Chicken Curry, Rice, Corn
 Tomato Pasta, Tomato & Herb Sauce
 Tomato Sauce, Garlic Bread, Cashew
 Curry
 Chicken Curry, Mushroom, Mushroom
 Curry
 Curry Potato Skin, Slice, Beef, Cheese
 Curry
 Sausage, Mushroom, Potato, Curry
 Curry Chicken, Mushroom, Potato, Curry
 Curry, Chicken, Mushroom, Potato, Curry
 Curry, Chicken, Mushroom, Potato, Curry

The Pecco Food Menu
 Chicken Curry, Rice, Corn
 Tomato Pasta, Tomato & Herb Sauce
 Tomato Sauce, Garlic Bread, Cashew
 Curry
 Curry Potato Skin, Slice, Beef, Cheese
 Curry
 Sausage, Mushroom, Potato, Curry
 Curry Chicken, Mushroom, Potato, Curry
 Curry, Chicken, Mushroom, Potato, Curry
 Curry, Chicken, Mushroom, Potato, Curry

The evaluation found that initial expectations were realised in practice. Overall, workers and young people reported healthier eating habits, a greater willingness to try new foods, and more stable energy and concentration levels throughout the day. Through youth work settings and approaches, staff observed improved moods, confidence, and participation, with food provision creating calmer, more positive environments. According to workers, families expressed relief from financial strain, noting that the meals *“took the pressure off”* household budgets and reduced stress during the costly summer period. While levels of need varied, the overall evidence indicates that the Summer Meals Pilot successfully met or exceeded its core aims of supporting wellbeing, and easing economic pressures for young people and their families.

Evidence from the feedback of both workers and young people suggests that young people took up the opportunity of accessing meals in a number of positive ways. Young people across the sites were largely positive about the food, with many expressing their enjoyment of the meals provided. Comments such as *“It’s better than school dinners”* and *“The food here is nicer than what we get at home sometimes”* reflected appreciation for the quality and freshness of the food. Staff observations consistently aligned with this, noting that providing balanced, appealing meals created a more positive atmosphere in youth spaces, encouraged attendance, and increased participation in activities following mealtimes. Workers noted that there was often a tangible, lighter and more playful atmosphere during and after food.

For some young people, the programme was their first introduction to certain foods. On the site visits, feedback from young people included phrases such as *“I’d never had peppers before – they’re actually grand”* and *“I never eat kiwi – I like it now”*, illustrating how exposure to new options was often accompanied by curiosity and a willingness to try more. Fruit kebabs and fruit smoothies were often used to showcase new fruits and involve young people in preparing food.

Importance of youth work settings

A further important point of feedback from youth workers was the nature of the environment being provided by the programmes. Young people often see the youth setting as their space and feel safe and free there, in ways they might not be in their home or in school. Integrating that sense of *“psychological safety”* linked to reliable food access, practical food preparation skills, food hygiene and so on, is hugely powerful and, according to worker feedback, there is evidence that some young people are transferring learning to the home. Programmes incorporating cooking and food preparation were particularly effective in helping to develop youth work approaches, linking food to wellbeing and life skills. One 15-year-old boy said he specifically came to the centre to learn how to cook basic food for his own siblings at home.

Case Study 1

Carlow Regional Youth Service (CRYS)



Carlow Regional Youth Service (CRYS) used the Holiday Food Scheme as more than a catering budget; it became a youth-work tool for skills, connection and dignity. It deliberately set out to help meet the nutritional, social, and emotional needs of local young people.

Planning started early: staff convened cross-project meetings to agree activities, set a realistic budget for snacks, lunches and hot meals, and line up local suppliers who could meet both nutritional and cost requirements.

Young people shaped decisions through quick polls and focus groups, keeping the offer opt-in and stigma-free.

- 🍏 **683 young people participated in programmes**
- 🍏 **1034 lunches were provided to young people**
- 🍏 **110 hot meals were provided to young people**
- 🍏 **3276 healthy snacks and fruit were provided to young people**

A small sample of the wide variety of approaches taken:

Universal food offer embedded in programmes: Snacks, lunches and hot meals built into summer camps, evening sessions and celebration events; practical food skills were taught (*Pizza-Making Party* with low-cost dough and take-home fruit “sunflowers”).

Evening Meal at The Vault - co-designed menus, an Aldi “trolley dash” for budgeting/ label reading, rotating cooking roles, and shared buffet dining that knitted groups together.

Outdoor and community reach: Outdoor Drop-Ins in parks/ skate park paired games with grab-and-go snacks and fruit; Detached work offered food in young people's spaces.

Camps and thematic programmes: Community Summer Camp; Gaming Camp; Summer Action Camp; Water Sports Hub (kayak/SUP/rowing); STEAM; Digital Animation; transition programmes (*Stepping Stones*); wellbeing residential; sports strands (Social Soccer, Volleyball Vibes) and celebration meals.

The **Fake Away Programme** invited young people to explore healthier and more affordable versions of their favourite takeaway meals while building confidence to cook at home. Over three interactive days, participants engaged in hands-on cooking sessions preparing **homemade pizzas and smoothies, vegetable stir-fries, apple and fruit crumble, and a high-protein breakfast cake**. The emphasis was on **cost-savvy substitutions** and **batch cooking**, showing how everyday ingredients could be used to create nutritious, budget-friendly meals without sacrificing flavour.

Who was targeted?

Those **most at risk of food insecurity, social isolation, or disadvantage, including:** -

- 🍏 Young people living in areas of high deprivation
- 🍏 Young people transitioning between key stages in life
- 🍏 Young people facing additional or multiple barriers, including new communities
- 🍏 Those affected by alcohol and drug misuse

Outcomes: Staff reported a number of positive outcomes: -

- 🍏 Addressed "holiday hunger"
- 🍏 Reduce financial pressures on parents/guardians
- 🍏 Promotes equity and inclusion
- 🍏 Supports child development
- 🍏 Enhances community engagement
- 🍏 Reduces isolation for young people

Carlow Regional Youth Service
Youth Work, Ireland

**TUESDAY
29TH JULY**

40 Fruithill Manor,
Graiguecullen

**PIZZA
MAKING
PARTY**

**10 - 18 YEARS
NO CHARGE**

11.30AM - 1PM
SESSION

2.30PM - 4PM
SESSION

**FOR ANY QUERIES PLEASE CONTACT
SIOBHAN ON 085 789 7339 OR THERESA ON 086 805 4601**

Engaging with young people

The sense of the food provision creating new opportunities for services to engage with young people was reinforced by feedback provided by staff at one site at the end of the pilot. According to one staff member,

“food [was] a great tool for engaging with all the new young people engaging with the service for the first time or returning after being away from the service for some time – a great conversation starter, great relaxer and great opportunity to sit together and have the chats and build relationships.”

More generally, the staff member felt that

“young people were more open, connected and engaging in the youth work process and the summer programme in general allowed for some real important youth work to take place.”



The role of food in creating opportunities for relationship-building was also emphasised during interviews with policy stakeholders over the course of the evaluation, with one highlighting that

“it really does help in terms of building trust and relationships when you can, you know, break bread.”

Inclusion, Neurodiversity and Dietary Needs

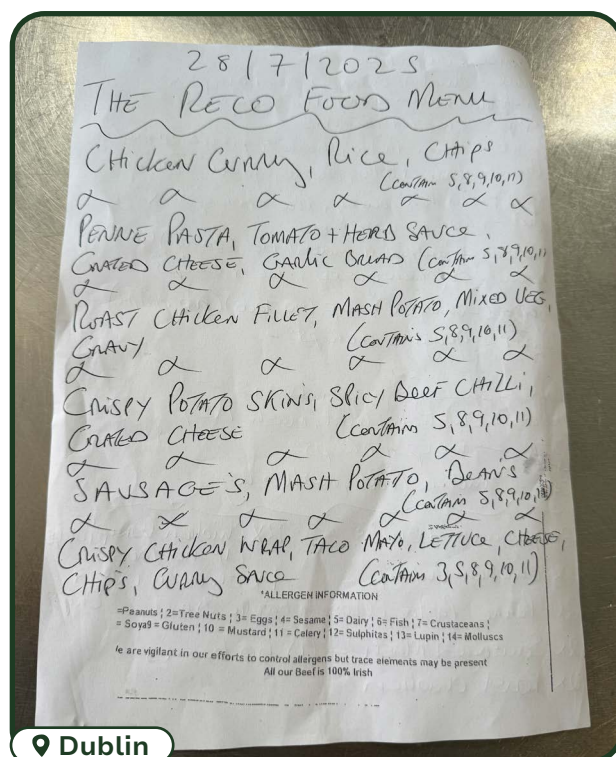
Site visits highlighted that youth workers were responsive to the needs of neurodivergent young people within their programmes. There were examples of services taking a very deliberate relational approach to ensure inclusion - adapting menus and mealtime environments so that all young people could participate, regardless of dietary restrictions, sensory preferences, or food-related anxieties.

Feedback from some managers suggested that youth worker training and practice helps ensure such inclusivity. For example, several youth services reported working with young people with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) or other forms of neurodivergence who displayed sensory-based food aversions. Youth workers noted that some preferred “beige foods” - such as chicken, rice, or chips - or avoided foods with skins or strong textures. Staff adjusted preparation methods, for example peeling cucumbers or introducing new foods gradually “on rotation.” This non-pressured approach allowed young people to observe, decline, and later

return to try small portions at their own pace. Workers observed that some young people who initially refused meals later came back for seconds, highlighting the value of choice, repetition, and gentle encouragement.

“[The Café layout with menus] allowed young people to think about what they would like, having options [was] very important – some young people with sensory issues around - types of food, issues around [the] feel of food, eating in public, slow eaters, issues with teeth etc. - all looked comfortable thanks to the variety of the food available, the atmosphere in the space was busy, but calm, well organised and planned – young people really appreciated the effort made for them”

For young people with specific dietary or religious requirements, such as Halal, vegetarian or vegan diets, external catering companies were reported to work directly with youth workers and participants to co-design appropriate alternatives. However, this was not universal and did present challenges when meals were prepared centrally or in bulk. Where there was a need, sites seemed to ensure that no young person was excluded. As one worker explained, “I’ll always have an alternative in the freezer”. Where Halal meat could not be sourced locally, vegetarian options were offered as an alternative.



Case Study 2

Drogheda Youth Development CLG /Boomerang Youth Service (Louth and Meath)

Using food to foster routine, connection and dignity through the Summer Meals Pilot

Drogheda Youth Development (DYD), operating the *Boomerang Youth Service*, ran the Summer Meals 2025 Pilot as a centre-wide inclusion and wellbeing initiative rather than a stand-alone food programme. It aimed to meet nutritional needs while creating a welcoming daily routine and a sense of belonging for young people aged 9–18 across Drogheda and South Louth. Running from 10 June to 22 August (11 weeks), the project provided freshly cooked meals each weekday between 12:00–16:00, complemented by fruit, yoghurt, milk and water every day.



Participation and scale

Over the 11 weeks, the café served 1,133 meals, reaching 462 young people across internal youth groups, summer camps, International Protection Accommodation Centres (IPAS), and external partners such as Southside Youth Project. The approach combined universal access with discreet targeting. Each young person received a cloakroom-style ticket when signing in to UBU groups or summer camps, which could then be exchanged for a meal. This ensured fairness, removed stigma, and provided a simple monitoring tool for participation.

Activities and food model

All meals were prepared fresh daily on site by a Café Manager and two Catering Assistants in Boomerang's full industrial kitchen, following Nutritional Standards for Hot School Meals. The team emphasised careful menu planning, portion control, and stock rotation, with dishes cooked from scratch using quality ingredients. The varied menu rotated between Shepherd's Pie, Roast Chicken, Spaghetti Bolognese, Chicken Curry, Lasagne, and Wholemeal Pizza, always paired with fresh vegetables, wholemeal breads or rice, and fruit bowls. Vegetarian and religious dietary options were provided on request, with staff gently encouraging young people to sample new foods.

A particular innovation was the external food requirement form, allowing youth workers from other groups to pre-order hot meals, packed lunches, or wraps for off-site activities. This flexible catering model meant that groups without cooking facilities could still offer nutritious meals while maintaining youth-work priorities.

Learning and engagement

Youth participation was integral. Young people consistently described the food as *“great choices,” “saves us money,”* and *“good to eat with my friends.”* Some tried foods for the first time - *“I tried corn on the cob – it was lovely”* and others commented on how it *“saved us money”* and encouraged them to come to the club more often. Staff observed that lunchtime created calm, positive energy in the building:

“The catering staff encouraged young people to try vegetables; most enjoyed them, and many asked for seconds.”

Although some participants were initially shy about eating in public, sitting down together became a valuable social routine. The café layout and friendly kitchen team fostered confidence, politeness, and gratitude among young people, many of whom expressed appreciation directly to staff.

Challenges and learning

Maintaining attendance was a challenge, as routines and family schedules shifted during the holidays, but the reliable food offer helped sustain engagement. The team also noted that including youth workers in meals would further normalise eating together and encourage young people to try new dishes. A future ambition is to standardise a two-week menu cycle and maintain the café’s flexibility for trips and off-site groups.

Self reported outcomes

- **1,133 meals provided to 462 young people over 11 weeks**
- Increased willingness to **try new foods** and improved **awareness of nutrition**
- **Reduced financial strain** for families
- **Strengthened relationships** and positive routines during summer months
- A **proven model** for integrating food provision with youth-work practice



Conclusion

- It was established that the pilot had a range of positive impacts on the young people it reached, particularly in relation to wellbeing through participation in youth work activities.
- Youth service workers surveyed during the pilot anticipated significant positive effects on young people's physical and mental wellbeing, as well as a reduction in financial stress for participating families.
- Evidence from site visits, focus groups, and youth worker feedback confirmed these expectations, demonstrating the pilot's positive impact on nutrition, physical health, mood, and mental wellbeing, alongside reduced financial pressure for families.

Additional outcomes observed included:

- Increased participation and engagement in other youth work activities.
- Greater involvement of young people in food preparation and cooking, helping to build practical skills and prompting shifts in food preferences.
- A stronger sense of psychological safety among participants in some projects, which staff attributed to the reliability of food access.



Chapter 7: Barriers and enablers for effective delivery

Introduction

This chapter sets out findings in relation to another core objective of the evaluation: to identify barriers and enablers for effective delivery as experienced by youth work programmes over the course of the pilot. These were identified over the course of the evaluation through survey and interview engagement with youth services, ETBs and policy stakeholders, as well as emerging from observations made during site visits.

Early challenges and barriers

Feedback from many of the workers who had a managerial or coordination role was that they were initially reluctant to apply or participate in the pilot. They felt the programme was too prescriptive, came too late for effective planning, and would involve too much additional work for the youth workers who were already too busy during the summer. However, most managers also recognised the opportunity the funding presented to support young people and meet very pressing needs. Through discussions with the Department, the rules around the pilot were loosened and this was greatly appreciated by the managers, who had not, by that time, applied. When asked during site visits what message they would give the Department if the pilot were to be rolled out next year, workers consistently emphasised the need for as much planning time as possible. Several noted that awarding the funding in the early months of the year would make a significant difference to preparation and delivery.

Likewise, respondents to the ETB survey highlighted several challenges they had experienced with regards to the guidance and initial programme design for the pilot. A number of respondents highlighted problems they had identified with the initial guidance, including that it was overly restrictive regarding the kinds of food to be provided (and how the food could be provided), and too limited in only allowing one programme to deliver the pilot per ETB area. Some respondents said they had struggled to find organisations in their area willing to take part in the pilot until the guidance was made more flexible. Other key challenges identified by ETB respondents included a lack of time provided to roll out the pilot in time for summer, and a lack of consultation with youth services or ETBs in the design of the pilot.

Barriers during the pilot

ETB respondents were asked about barriers they anticipated with regards to the effective delivery of the summer meals programme. Possible barriers mentioned included the potential for variable attendance levels amongst young people over the summer months, and the potential need for additional staffing capacity to help prepare meals and cover periods of annual leave. Two respondents said that the increased flexibility of the pilot in comparison to how it was initially advertised had made them feel more confident in the ability of projects to overcome potential barriers.

Feedback also highlighted that services too were learning how best to provide the food in a way that was most impactful.

“We’re learning too and adapting each week as we find out what works and why. We noticed that giving snack bars stopped the kids eating fruit so we held back on the bars and saw an increase in fruit consumption”

Preventing a ‘cliff edge’

During site visits, many workers stressed the programme’s vital role in preventing what one described as a *“cliff edge”* - the point when school, and with it school meals, stopped, leaving parents facing seven or eight weeks of holidays with no support in relation to food provision. As has been described, the pilot funding enabled youth workers to purchase fresher, more varied and more nutritious food over the summer. However, both workers and some young people expressed concern about what would happen once the summer ended: that some young people might go back to rejecting school dinners, waiting until the end of the school day to attend after-school youth clubs where meals were often limited to basic toasties because the funding was limited during term time and had to come out of youth club core budgets.

“a cliff edge” - the point when school, and with it school meals, stopped, leaving parents facing seven or eight weeks of holidays with no support in relation to food provision.

Whole-year funding

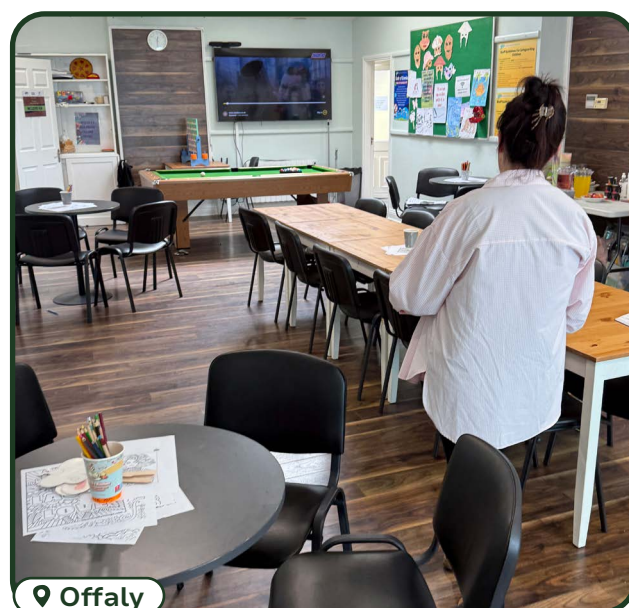
A recurring message from workers across all sites was the hope that youth services could apply at the start of each year for a set amount of funding ringfenced specifically for food. This funding could then be used flexibly throughout the year - at the discretion of the youth service - to cover all school holidays, some after-school food provision, and to support sites catering for school refusers or young people with additional support needs. Workers stressed that such an approach would greatly improve annual planning, avoid *“cliff edges”* in provision, and further embed healthy food into everyday youth work. As this evaluation shows, it could also help achieve wider benefits such as reducing child poverty and improving young people’s wellbeing.

Staffing/ volunteer adjustments

Another barrier to the pilot identified in the site visit feedback was the limited staff capacity to manage the food element. Many managers emphasised that allocating at least **20%** of the funding to administrative costs, including staff time was the minimum required to make delivery viable. Many were put off applying in the

first place, or applied for less money, as they were not sure they had the staff capacity to deliver the programme. The most effective sites typically had a dedicated local coordinator responsible for all aspects of food provision - liaising with caterers, developing menus, sourcing supplies, and organising collection and delivery.

40% of respondents to the Youth Service Worker Survey said their service had needed to adjust their staffing/ volunteer levels to be able to accommodate the meal/snack provision, while 60% said they had not had to do so. For the most part, those who had adjusted described having increased their staffing and volunteer levels to accommodate the meal and snack provision, including increasing the working hours of existing staff and hiring new summer support staff. Other respondents described adjusting staff rotas to ensure greater flexibility, and to ensure staff are onsite for food delivery times. In many cases, youth work staff were not employed full-time, and site visits revealed examples of staff volunteering their own time to ensure the programme ran smoothly. Feedback from across sites highlighted that effective local coordination, both at ETB and site level, was critical to the success of the pilot.



Enablers during the pilot

Looking at enabling factors, ETB survey respondents were also asked what staff, facilities, or partnerships they had put in place to support delivery of the summer meals programme. Some respondents described arrangements that had been put in place with local caterers, shops or restaurants, while others said that putting in place these kinds of partnerships was more the role of the local funded youth organisations.

“One UBU has engaged the services of a local catering company who usually provide School Meals and the other has a functioning cafe on site, so will prepare the food there.”

ETB respondents were then asked if there were any aspects of their partnership that they saw as enabling successful delivery. Here, respondents emphasised the importance of the strong and trusting existing relationships in place between ETBs and local youth work organisations as providing a strong foundation for the pilot to succeed.

“Knowledge and understanding of the local funded organisations - as we work with and support them throughout the year, the relationships that already exist will ensure that any issues arising should be surmountable”

Models of food provision

The evaluation found that no single food delivery model emerged as universally most effective. Rather, the strength of each approach depended on how well it aligned with local capacity, infrastructure, and the ethos of youth work delivery. Across the pilot sites, models ranged from fully in-house preparation and contracted catering to mixed models and voucher schemes for local food outlets. Each carried distinct advantages and trade-offs in terms of flexibility, quality, inclusion, and educational value.

Ultimately, the evaluation concludes that the effectiveness of any food delivery model lay not in the model itself, but in its integration within the principles of youth work - voluntary participation, relationship-based practice, inclusion, and empowerment. Projects that treated food as a core part of the youth work - not simply a logistical task - achieved the most positive results.

Whilst no single model emerged as universally the best, effective sites shared common characteristics:

- 🍆 **Youth voice in menu design** (e.g. chalkboards, recipe input)
- 🍆 **Flexibility to adjust meals to the programme context** (e.g. trips, culture days)
- 🍆 **Staff capacity to manage food safely and relationally**
- 🍆 **Strong supplier relationships or in-house chefs/ cooks**
- 🍆 **Facilities to host communal meals where young people and youth workers can sit and eat together**
- 🍆 **Reflection on what was working/ not working and willingness to adapt**



What does the literature say on food models? (including site examples)



In-house v contracted services – Holiday clubs frequently evaluate whether to provide food through internal catering or external contractors with many clubs choosing to outsource due to limitations in time, staffing or on-site facilities for in-house catering.⁵⁵ Having experienced staff or volunteers with the skills and experience in meal planning, food procurement and preparation can be a challenge and often these tasks are in addition to leadership or youth work commitments leading to the outsourcing of food procurement and meal preparation to local community organisations, local restaurants, catering companies or catering colleges.⁵⁶

In-house cooking allowed for greater skill development and nutritional control, while bought-in food enabled services with limited facilities to participate. Voucher schemes for local food outlets were praised for dignity and choice but required high levels of oversight. Mixed models (e.g. preparing snacks onsite, main meals bought in) were common. Key success factors were less about the model and more about how well food was integrated into the youth work ethos and daily rhythm.



Catering spaces – There are two distinct spaces for food provision – a cooking space and an eating space, both adhering to hygiene standards with the opportunity to cook on the premises or receive food from external providers to serve to the young people depending on what infrastructure is available onsite.⁵⁷

One site was fortunate to have received a council grant to fund a professional kitchen to allow young people to make meals or bake while others were working with domestic equipment, which limited food storage, calling for further funding to expand existing facilities such as commercial refrigeration and hot/ cool boxes for transporting food and warmers. The presence of allotments spaces for growing fruits, vegetables and herbs or housing a chicken coup for fresh eggs added another dimension, teaching young people how to grow their own, where able, and the availability of fresh produce to supplement meals.



Nutrition education – The provision of education can be delivered in different way including; face-to-face sessions discussing food and nutrition often during mealtimes, practical hands-on food education (e.g., food shopping, cooking sessions), take-home nutrition education (e.g., leaflets, recipes) alongside online resources (e.g., websites, video's).⁵⁸

Two sites chose to employ the services of external providers for nutrition education, one guiding menu selection and planning while the other provided tailored

55 University of Northampton (2021), "[*Evaluation Report: Holiday Activities & Food Programme*](#)"

56 Mann et al., (2021), "[*Procurement and delivery of food at holiday provision clubs*](#)"

57 Dublin City University (2022), "[*National Strategy Group for Hunger Prevention in Schools*](#)"

58 Round et al., (2024), "[*A survey of nutritional education within the Holiday Activities and Food programme across England*](#)"

education sessions attended by both young people and youth workers. One site recognised the need, within their participant group, for extended nutrition education and plan to invite a local chef to visit after the holiday period to run a healthy eating programme based on nutrition standards. All sites in their applications to participate recognised the need to follow national nutritional guidelines and often used mealtimes and the food provided to guide discussion around nutrition and health.



Cookery projects – Incorporating cookery sessions into activities where young people make meals on site or are provided with ingredients to take home to cook using recipes, focused on affordability and accessibility. An example of a cookery session hosted by a youth project in Halton, England included education on budgeting, accessing groceries locally whether via shops or foodbanks, shopping tips including timing for securing discounted items and understanding sell by/ use by dates to avoid waste while maintaining food safety.⁵⁹

Where able, young people attending the summer meal programmes were encouraged to attend cookery or baking classes as an activity at the club, were involved in shopping for food in local stores or provided with recipes and basic ingredients to enable young people on their own or with the support of family members to cook at home, taking photographs to showcase their final dish. *“Young people learned lots of new skills – hands on experience to cook and prepare a variety of foods, exposure to a range of ingredients, learn about different utensils, appliance and cooking methods”.*



Detached youth work – Outreach initiatives such as the *Detached Youth Work Programme* in Monaghan engage with vulnerable young people, offering support and referrals to local services for issues relating to mental health, substance use, and homelessness. These engagements, often on a Friday or Saturday evening, aim to foster long-term positive outcomes and a way of connecting disadvantaged young people with youth workers in their local community rather than the traditional youth club setting.⁶⁰

Youth services with dedicated detached teams were able to engage directly with young people and their families and initiate conversations around food and nutrition. In some cases, food provision was incorporated into detached work conducted in spaces familiar to young people such as streets, parks, housing estates and town centres. However, the uptake of food in these settings was limited as young people were often hesitant to accept food or had other priorities needing attention during these interactions.

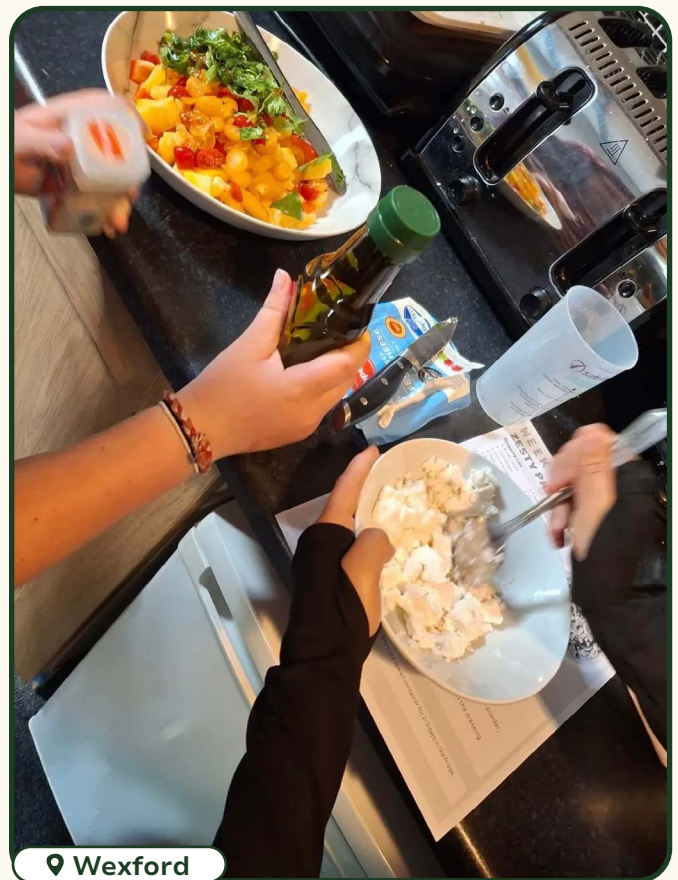
59 Youthfed (2023), "[Cookery Project, funded by Halton Borough Council](#)"

60 Youth Work Ireland (2025) "[Detached Programme](#)"



Feeding practices – Describes interactions between a caregiver e.g., youth worker and a young person around food and mealtimes where positive eating behaviours are encouraged e.g., making positive statements about the food available, modelling healthy eating behaviours, providing a selection of foods to try, involving young people in menu planning or food preparation⁶¹

The inclusion of young people in food preparation and meal set up was a key factor in engagement, with sites commenting on the buzz and chatter around the tasks, creating an energy in the room. The use of sharing platters with complementary foods such as hummus and crackers or chopped fruit portions to make kebabs or smoothies were effective at encouraging consumption. *“Young people were more likely to consume fruit when they were actively involved in its preparation”*. Visits to restaurants created an opportunity for staff to guide selection for example rice instead of chips and choosing dishes that included vegetables with youth workers leading the way through their own choices.



61 Bayes et al., (2023), *“Exploring the feasibility of using evidence-based feeding practices to promote children’s healthy eating in holiday clubs”*

Skills development and leadership

Across multiple sites, workers identified a gap in formal training related to food hygiene and safety standards. While many youth workers had basic awareness, some reported relying on “*common sense*” rather than structured knowledge. As one manager put it,

“We can cook and serve fine, but we’d feel more confident with proper certification.”

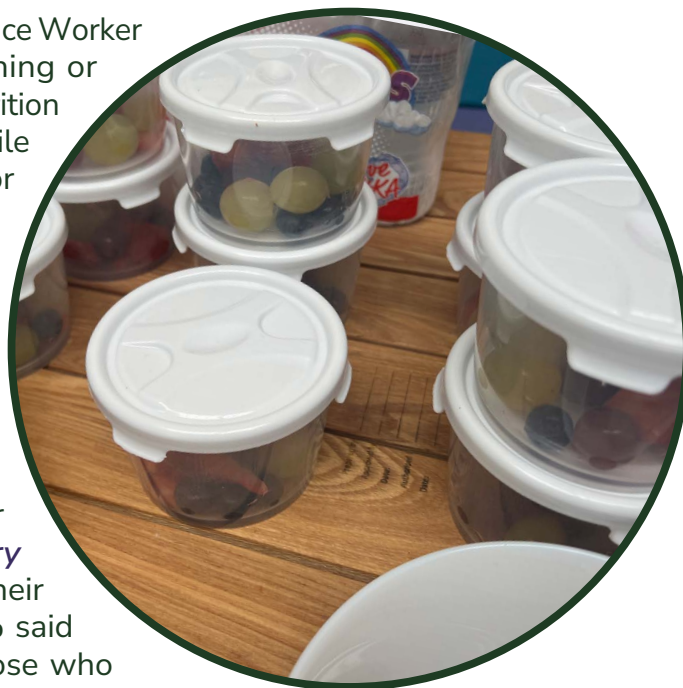
This was especially relevant for sites where young people were actively involved in food preparation - reinforcing the need to model correct hygiene practices.





Nutrition knowledge was another area highlighted. Workers spoke about wanting more training to help them design menus that were both appealing and balanced, especially when catering for young people with limited diets. One staff member reflected,

“We know the basics, but it’d help to have clear guidance on how to make the healthy choice the easy choice.”

Overall, **48%** of respondents to the Youth Service Worker Survey stated that they had received training or guidance on food provision, dietary needs, nutrition standards, or food safety related to meals; while **40%** said that they had not received training or guidance of this kind, and **12%** were unsure. Amongst those who had received this, the most common kinds of training or guidance were HACCP training, specific sessions delivered by their ETB or the Department of Health relating to the pilot, and the Healthy Food Made Easy programme.

In addition, **50%** of Youth Service Worker survey respondents said they felt “*very prepared*” to support meal delivery within their summer activities, while the remaining **50%** said they felt somewhat prepared. Amongst those who answered “*Somewhat prepared*”, some respondents expressed uncertainty regarding the nutritional guidance for the pilot, while others explained that delivering the pilot would require a period of learning and adaption for their service with regards to the provision of food at this scale. **Asked what kinds of support or resources they felt would help them deliver this programme well, key themes to emerge amongst responses were:**






-  Additional training and guidance, particularly around food safety, nutritional standards, and best practice for meal delivery;
-  More support around the food supply and logistics required to provide meals;
-  Particular types of equipment or facilities to help facilitate meal provision, such as cooking utensils, space, BBQ, easy to follow recipes for the children. One worker commented *“I think having food warmers would be great as young people arrive to the service at different times;”*
-  More advice and support in relation to menus and meal planning to fit with both nutritional standards and young people’s tastes, for example, recipe books, meal planners designed for young people was seen to be helpful. Guidance on portion sizes for young people and what is the recommended size for a meal would also be welcomed.

Sustainability and future delivery

Respondents to the Youth Service Worker Survey were asked what they would like to feed back to the designers and funders of the programme. Here, many respondents provided positive feedback on the pilot to date, highlighting their gratitude for the scheme and the positive impact they feel it has had for the young people and families involved.

“This is a fantastic initiative, and we are very grateful to be involved in the pilot of this programme. The families and young people we work with are really grateful for the food they get through this programme.”

Other key areas of feedback to emerge included:

-  Reflections that delivering the pilot did place additional demands on staff, with some respondents feeling that additional funding would help them to run the Programme more smoothly (for example, by enabling them to have one staff member focused solely on food-related tasks such as dishing up, cleaning and washing up);
-  Requests for the pilot to be made into a permanent programme, both to enable earlier planning of how best to integrate meals into the provision of activities and to reduce concerns around potential negative impacts on young people should the provision of meals prove only to be temporary;
-  A desire amongst some for more flexibility in certain areas, for example to supply families with ingredients to cook together and to be able to give families vouchers to cover periods when youth projects are not open;

- 🍅 Feedback on the importance of coordination and collaboration in enabling the pilot to have a positive impact, including collaborations between different UBU projects to ensure the right young people are targeted;
- 🍅 Requests for earlier and increased engagement with key stakeholders including youth workers with regards to the design and implementation of future programmes.

Along similar lines, respondents to the ETB survey were asked to describe any recommendations they have regarding any potential future iterations of the Programme.

Key themes to emerge amongst responses here included:

- 🍅 Continued flexibility of approach from the Department with regards to the delivery of the programme, allowing room for styles of delivery to differ based on local capacity and need;
- 🍅 Increased consultation and dialogue with ETBs and the youth work sector prior to roll out, ensuring local partners have sufficient time and capacity to take on the additional workload associated with programmes of this kind;
- 🍅 Two respondents felt funding should be provided directly to UBUs or integrated into the overall UBU funding scheme to help them to incorporate the provision of meals into their summer programmes;
- 🍅 Two respondents felt there was the potential for a broader interagency approach to be adopted in utilising the funding, potentially involving partners such as schools, third sector organisations, Family Resource Centres and other ETBs.

Policy learning and implications for future design

Finally, interviews carried out with a range of policy stakeholders working in areas relevant to young people and the issue of holiday hunger shed further light on key enablers and barriers for the pilot, as well as providing important learning with regards to the policy alignment of the pilot and future programme design in this area.

Firstly, there was a strong sense amongst those interviewed that the pilot had indeed revealed there was a high level of need for service provision aimed at addressing holiday hunger.

“The key message for us is that holiday hunger is a real concern in communities right across Ireland.”

A pilot or scheme of this kind was seen as a logical accompaniment to the progress that has been made in expanding hot school meals in recent years. While this was seen as having made *“a real difference in the lives of children and young people”*, it was felt that there was a need to *“recognise that [progress] has also created a gap”* with regards to the provision of meals outwith term times.

A pilot or scheme of this kind was seen as a logical accompaniment to the progress that has been made in expanding hot school meals in recent years.

Most of those interviewed, moreover, felt that the pilot had shown that youth services have a pivotal role to play in addressing holiday hunger in Ireland, as well as in engaging more broadly with young people at risk of deprivation or social exclusion. One interviewee, for example, felt that

“one of the key elements that worked well is simply the branding, the understanding, the awareness - people knew what you were talking about [...] the fact food is often part of a youth service, they’re often cooking or making food with young people - so this wasn’t an alien concept.”

Another interviewee felt that providing meals via youth services already attended by young people locally was a way of “meeting young people where they’re at, enabling them to access food [...] it’s really important you’re facilitating that.” The interviewee also highlighted the potential for additional positive impacts to arise as a result of providing holiday meals in this way:

“Youth workers always say that the meals that they provide in the service, it’s a lot more [than] nutrition. It’s that moment for connection, mentoring, informal learning [...] the scheme can have so much more value added than just providing the meal if done right.”

Stakeholders also emphasised the alignment of the pilot with Ireland’s broader policy ambitions and frameworks. These included the work coordinated by the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office, the School Meals Programme, and the European Child Guarantee to which the Irish Government is committed.

“The obvious place where it aligns is the commitment to school meals. I think relative to other European countries, school meals have come relatively late in Ireland’s policy history so there’s a really strong political backing to the work.”

As a result of the need highlighted by the pilot, as well as the continuing relevance of addressing



holiday hunger to Ireland's broader policy ambitions, stakeholders felt there was now a need to mainstream the provision of holiday meals in order to make it a permanent feature of Ireland's policy response to food insecurity and child poverty. Stakeholders put forward a range of ideas as to how the pilot may be adapted and built upon into a more permanent scheme in practice. One stakeholder, for example, explained that the pilot was *"essentially designed for the formal education system and kind of adapted for youth services"*. As a result, the stakeholder felt there was now a question of *"whether we continue with this kind of approach or whether we embrace it as something unique to the youth services"*, for example, by simply increasing the level of annual funding allocated to youth services in order to enable them to incorporate in a year-round programme of food provision to their activities.

... stakeholders felt there was now a need to mainstream the provision of holiday meals in order to make it a permanent feature of Ireland's policy response to food insecurity and child poverty.

"Do we just mainstream it into "Okay, this youth service got £120,000 last year. Now we're giving them £125,000, with £5,000 specifically for food."

One stakeholder felt an arrangement of this kind would provide services with

"the certainty of knowing what their income is going to be and what the money coming in is going to be [...] they're able to plan that and they're able to use the resources that work for their service. They'll know during the summer how many young people to be engaging with. They'll know what the activities are."

Other stakeholders, while supporting the mainstreaming and continuation of the pilot in the form of a more permanent programme, also highlighted particular adaptations they would like to see based on their observations of the pilot. A key concern for many was the issue of how best to ensure the provision of meals reaches as many young people in need as possible, including those who may not already be attending or known to youth services. One stakeholder, for example, felt that:

"It should be continued, but [...] it should be maybe a bit more tailored to how the projects are. Trusting people on the ground, giving them the money [and] responsibility rather than just parachuting in one big one grant would be my recommendation for the future."

In addition to the services funded through the pilot, this interviewee felt that providing grants to other local partners such as local School Completion Projects could help ensure as wide a reach as possible for future iterations of the pilot; while another stakeholder felt the priority should be on

“making sure that all young people have access to youth work, if we’re going to roll out [a programme] that’s not just a pilot but a more lasting scheme.”

Other key issues for the future highlighted by stakeholders included the importance of data capture and learning, and the value of maintaining a universalist approach to eligibility for the scheme.

“I think future wise, we have to think about outside of a pilot - how do we record this? How do we record how many meals, all that kind of stuff. And there’s a wider conversation around how we capture data in youth services, how we produce reporting on outcomes for young people.”

“Any kind of eligibility through family income, through means testing might be one way to target meals, yes, and it might save the state money. But there’s also a really clear evidence base that as soon as you introduce a means test, people who are eligible don’t sign up.”

Across all stakeholders, meanwhile, there was a strong emphasis on the importance of collaboration, coordination and partnership - both across different government departments and with relevant outside agencies and stakeholders - in maximising the impact of any future programmes. Crucially, this was seen as including the youth programmes and organisations most closely involved with delivering the pilot on the ground, drawing on their knowledge and experience of how best to meet the needs of young people in their local areas at risk of experiencing holiday hunger and other forms of social exclusion.

“If we wanted to make sure that it’s the most beneficial, we need to make sure we’re co-creating it with youth workers and volunteers who are seeing this and who know what’s most effective [...] if you’re designing it from that top-down departmental perspective, you could unintentionally be excluding certain groups [and] failing to address those very specific vulnerabilities of the local populations that you are trying to serve.”

Conclusion

Overall, the evaluation identified a range of barriers and enabling factors experienced by the youth services, ETBs and policy stakeholders involved with designing, implementing and delivering the pilot. These have important implications for policy learning and future service delivery in this area.

- Early reluctance among managers and youth services was mitigated by the Department taking a more flexible approach, which facilitated improved participation and delivery.
- Consistent feedback emphasised the need for earlier funding decisions (ideally early in the year) to allow adequate planning, staff preparation, and partnership development.
- ETBs reported increased consultation with local services enabled more inclusive participation and smoother delivery.
- Existing trust between ETBs and youth services was a major enabler, helping to overcome logistical issues and ensure effective coordination and communication.
- Limited staff time and administrative capacity were key barriers. Effective sites allocated at least 20% of funding to coordination and admin, and many increased staff or volunteer hours to manage food provision.
- No single model proved superior. Success depended on alignment with local capacity and youth work principles. Effective sites integrated food provision into youth work practice - emphasising inclusion, participation, and shared meals.
- Shared features of effective sites included (i) youth involvement in menu planning; (ii) flexibility to adapt meals to activities and cultural contexts; (iii) adequate facilities and staff for safe food preparation and communal eating; (iv) strong supplier relationships and reflective practice.
- Many workers lacked formal food hygiene and nutrition training. Around half had received some guidance (e.g., HACCP, Healthy Food Made Easy), but demand for more structured and practical support was high.
- Workers and ETBs called for the pilot to become a permanent, flexible, and adequately funded programme, ideally with ringfenced food budgets and multi-year planning cycles.
- Stakeholders highlighted strong alignment with national strategies - including the School Meals Programme, Child Poverty and Wellbeing Framework, and European Child Guarantee - and saw youth services as essential partners in tackling holiday hunger.
- Future priorities included (i) mainstream funding of holiday meal provision all year-round through youth services (ii) maintain universal access (avoid means testing). (iii) strengthen interagency collaboration and local co-design with youth workers; (iv) improve data capture and outcome reporting for accountability and learning.

Chapter 8: Policy learning and conclusions

This section draws on evidence from the evaluation to identify lessons for policy and programme design. It considers what worked, why it worked, and under what conditions future initiatives might be achieved. In doing so, it seeks to inform decisions about whether and how to continue, scale or mainstream the Summer Meals Pilot as part of Ireland’s wider response to child poverty and wellbeing.

The evaluation demonstrates that youth work-based food provision can make a meaningful contribution to addressing food insecurity, holiday hunger, and young people’s wellbeing. However, **the value of the pilot extends beyond its immediate outcomes: it provides policy insight into how community infrastructure, relationships, and local discretion can together create a sustainable, dignified model of support.**

Policy learning and implications for future design

1

There is a clear and ongoing need. Food insecurity and holiday hunger were consistently identified by youth workers, ETBs and national stakeholders as widespread and persistent among young people. The pilot successfully contributed to addressing this need, providing nutritional, wellbeing and relational benefits. The evidence suggests that such interventions are not temporary fixes but essential responses to structural deprivation.

2

Youth services offered an accessible, stigma-free and relationship-based environment where young people could engage with food provision as part of their normal activities. Mealtimes became opportunities for connection, informal learning and inclusion. Young people are also more likely to stay connected to services and can experience support for themselves, (social skills, training, mental health support) and for their family (signposting available local support). Youth work settings and approaches are effective in encouraging young people to choose health food and drink alternatives.

3

Allowing ETBs and services to adapt food provision to their context - whether through in-house preparation, contracted catering or mixed models - proved essential. Effectiveness depended less on the delivery model itself and more on alignment with youth work practice.

4

The pilot demonstrated strong value for money but was not cost-neutral. There was a strong call for additional funds, ringfenced to address “holiday hunger” (at all times of the year) as part of core grants to youth services. Dedicated funding for coordination, staff time, training and facilities was also seen as essential. ETBs and services also highlighted the importance of early planning and consistent funding to avoid “cliff edges” in provision – from school terms into holiday period and also from good quality summer meals provision back into school term



Clearer coordination between departments, ETBs and youth services is needed to embed holiday food provision within wider strategies on child poverty, wellbeing and education. The pilot provides a platform for a coherent, cross-sectoral approach that could deliver better nutritional and developmental outcomes for young people. The pilot operated across the policy domains of education, youth work, social protection and health, yet delivery responsibilities often remained fragmented.

At the regional level, ETBs proved to be a crucial link between national policy and local delivery, supporting youth services, managing partnerships and monitoring outcomes. However, this role was largely undertaken without additional resources or formal recognition. Future programmes could build on this strength by resourcing ETBs as regional coordinators, with dedicated leads for food and wellbeing to connect schools, youth services and community partners. Several sites also demonstrated the value of collaboration with local authorities, social enterprises and catering colleges, which expanded access to facilities, equipment and training.

Joined-up approaches were most effective where youth services worked closely with schools and community partners to ensure shared planning, consistent nutrition standards which would help ensure continuity and reduce duplication. Embedding these practices within a national cross-sector framework would enable more efficient use of resources and ensure that holiday food provision contributes directly to Ireland's wider strategies on child poverty, wellbeing and education.

Policy Recommendations



Move from pilot to permanent programme as the pilot revealed significant unmet need and strong local engagement. Future delivery should form part of a permanent, nationally supported programme aligned with the *Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme* and the *School Meals Expansion Plan*. This should include an annual, ring-fenced budget for food provision within youth services, enabling multi-year planning and stability.



Introduce flexible and equitable funding mechanisms as initial funding allocations were overly restrictive and did not reflect local variation in need. Funding must also be considered alongside existing resourcing for UBU services, particularly programme budgets or general costs of running an engaging summer programme. A future programme should allow ETBs to allocate funding flexibly across multiple youth services, proportionate to local indicators of deprivation, food poverty and rural isolation. Weighted allocations would help ensure equity while maintaining local autonomy.

3 Resource ETBs as developmental partners as they could play a vital coordinating role but often do so without adequate recognition or resources. Future arrangements should formalise the ETB role in regional coordination, training and quality assurance, supported by dedicated capacity funding. Establishing a national ETB coordination network or regional “food leads” would enhance consistency and shared learning.

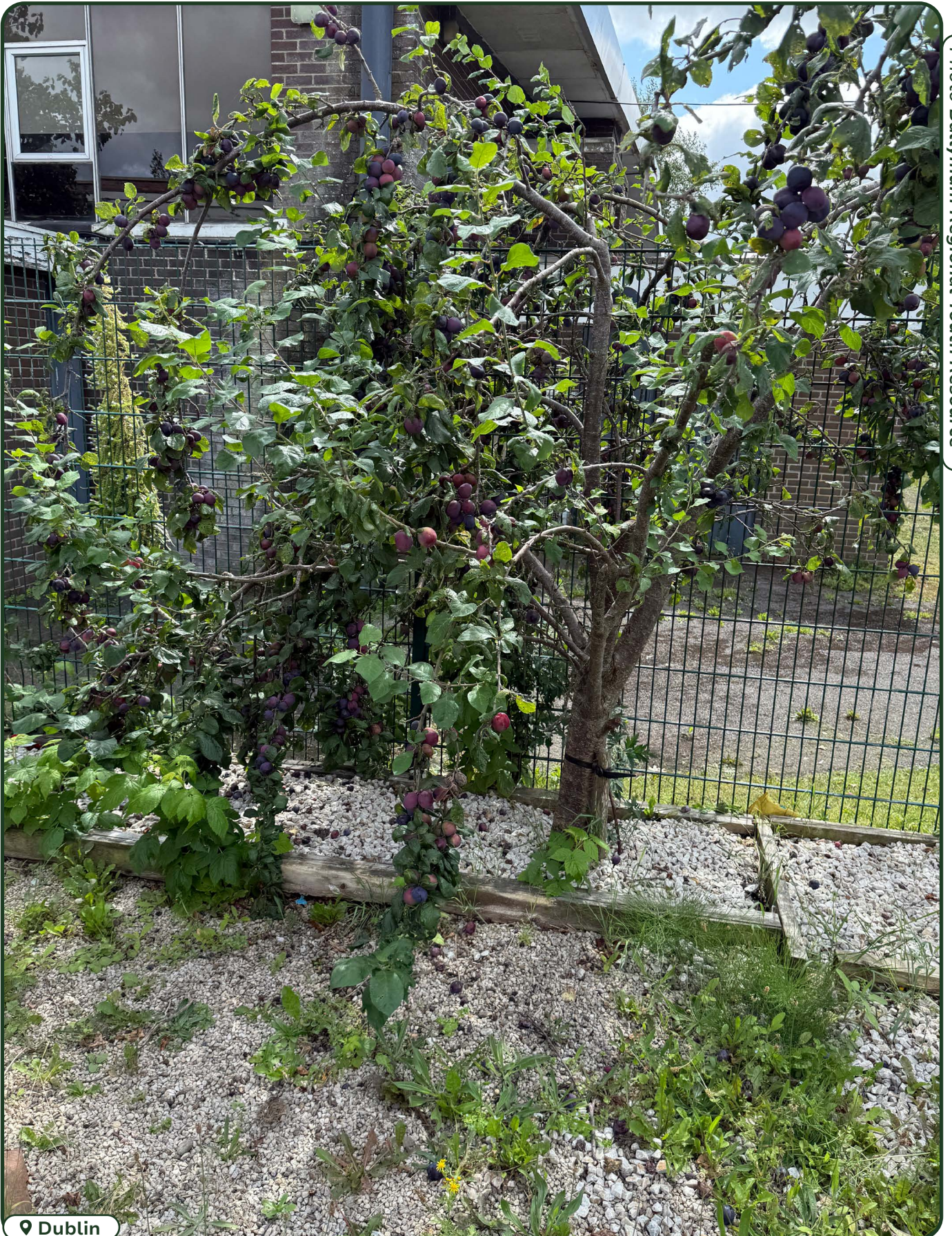
4 Embed the youth work approach to food provision in all holiday periods to ensure it remains rooted in the values and practices of youth work: voluntary participation, relationship-based engagement and empowerment. Training in food safety, nutrition, and inclusive practice should be extended to staff and volunteers, ensuring food is both safe and educational. Mealtimes should continue to be used as spaces for connection, skill development and informal learning.

5 Balance universality with targeted reach to avoid stigma, while recognising the need to prioritise areas with the highest deprivation. Future design should maintain universality at the point of delivery but allow strategic targeting through ETB-level planning and partnerships with schools, Family Resource Centres and Traveller and Roma services.

6 Stakeholders suggested that a single inter-departmental steering group - bringing together the Departments of Education and Youth, Social Protection, and Health, alongside the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office - could help ensure coherent oversight and strategic policy alignment.

7 Support infrastructure, training and local supply chains through capital and equipment investment - such as kitchen upgrades, refrigeration and transport containers. These were cited as essential for safety and sustainability. Local sourcing through community caterers or social enterprises can strengthen local economies while supporting nutritional standards.

8 Build light-touch monitoring and evidence systems to capture reach, participation, and outcomes without overburdening staff. Standardised templates for meal counts, attendance, and qualitative insights should sit alongside short feedback tools for young people and families to support ongoing learning.



📍 Dublin

Annex A: Comparative summer meal programmes

The following section includes a summary of comparative summer meal programmes across the UK and Europe.

England

In 2021, the UK government launched the Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF) following a series of pilot schemes (between 2018 and 2020) testing models of holiday provision for young people eligible for free school meals. Following rising levels of food insecurity post-Covid, the HAF scheme was expanded to 153 upper tier (county councils, London boroughs, metropolitan boroughs and unitary authorities) local authorities in England to provide one healthy meal a day (preferable a hot meal with the option of providing either breakfast, lunch or evening meal), enriching activities including sports, music, arts and crafts and outdoor pursuits, and food and nutrition activities not only for young people but their family members.⁶²

Key findings from an evaluation of the HAF programme by the University of York across four Yorkshire local authority areas in 2021 highlighted diverse delivery models from public and private provision with variation in quality. The evaluation found that the meals provided had a positive impact on food insecurity and young people attending were consuming a more varied, healthier diet; young people benefited from the social aspect of holiday clubs, learning new skills and socialising while parents were able to work or socialise in their local community; and local authorities receiving the funding were able to deliver well-rounded programmes despite tight timescales from funding provision to delivery.⁶³ Key recommendations from this evaluation included: a call for longer-term funding to enable local authorities to plan and continually evaluate their programmes, for eligibility for attendance to include all children to reduce stigma, with free and paid places managed by each authority, and a call for the continued provision of varied and tasty meals.⁶⁴

Since 2022, the HAF programme has provided 15.6 million HAF days to young people across England including provision during winter, Easter and summer (equivalent of 6 weeks). In 2025, local authorities are in their final year of a three-year funding settlement of over £200 million (per annum) which takes provision up to March 2026.⁶⁵ The Local Government Association (the national membership body for councils in England) are currently reaching out to HAF programmes to gather evidence, through case studies and focus group feedback, on the use of government funding to support local young people and their families. Through

62 Food Active (2025), '[Blog: Reflecting on four years of the Holiday Activities and Food Programme](#)'

63 Food Foundation (2021), '[A Yorkshire-based review of the implementation and impact of the Holiday Activities and Food Programme](#)'

64 Ibid

65 UK Government (2025), '[Guidance: Holiday activities and food programme 2025](#)'

this evaluation they aim to provide a local authority perspective and guidance to UK Government on the delivery of future derivatives of HAF while promoting the consideration for intersecting policies around early years provision, family hubs and wraparound programmes to create a streamlined offering that improves outcomes while reducing complexity for all those involved.⁶⁶

Example programme: Southend Council provide HAF under their Livewell Southend brand, a central point for health and wellbeing. Young people must be receiving free school meals or referred by their school or a professional working with them or their family. The programme includes 4 days in Spring (Easter), 16 days across Summer and 4 days in Winter (Christmas).⁶⁷ A 2023 - 2024 evaluation of the HAF programme noted delivery of ~15,000 sessions for >3500 young people (88% primary and 12% secondary pupils, including 19% of total attendance being young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)) with a budget of £700,000, 76% spent on delivery and the remainder on administration, capital expenditure, scheme promotion and other costs (booking costs, training etc.) with the majority (68%/~10000 sessions) delivered over the summer months during 2023. Key challenges included: young people were not used to having a hot meal in the middle of the day, 13% of places booked did not result in attendance, an increase in young people attending with SEND requiring additional support from known providers and when there was the option to receive a supermarket food voucher in preference to HAF, some families took up this option.⁶⁸

Scotland

The 'Summer Holiday Food, Activities and Childcare Programme: Guidance for Local Authorities' (2022) remains the key reference point for Scottish local authorities to deliver holiday meal and activities to young people from low-income families.⁶⁹ While central government provides the funding, local authorities operate independently to deliver summer meal programmes alongside partner organisations, such as Achieve More Scotland (a registered Scottish Charity) and FARE Scotland Ltd (a private limited company).⁷⁰

In addition, Foundation Scotland (grant making community foundation), in partnership with Sainsbury's and Comic Relief, provide funding opportunities to charitable organisations supporting children and young people to expand existing summer

66 Local Government Association (2025), '[Call for evidence: Holiday Activities and Food Programme \(HAF\)](#)'

67 Livewell Southend (2025), '[Holiday activities and food programme \(HAF\)](#)'

68 Department of Education, Southend of Sea'; City Council (2024), '[HAF 2023 – 2024 Southend Local Authority Annual Report](#).'

69 Scottish Government (2022), '[Summer holiday food, activities and childcare programme: guidance for local authorities](#)'

70 Glasgow City Council (2023), '[Glasgow Children's Holiday Food and Activity Programme](#)', (Monitoring report and funding recommendations)

programmes, run new holiday schemes or support children with disabilities to attend holiday food and activity programmes within the Glasgow City area.⁷¹

Glasgow's Holiday Club programme Summer 2025 – Spring 2026 has been running since Summer 2018 and is in alignment with the Scottish Government's Sustainable Development Goals aimed at providing 'access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round' by 2030 and Glasgow City Council's Strategic Plan (2022 – 2027) to 'reduce poverty and inequality in our communities'.⁷² The funding of up to £100,000 (per annum - Summer 33 days, October 5 days and Spring 9 days) is open to community and third sector organisations or consortiums by partnership agreement to fund food, ancillary staff and volunteer costs, activities, transport, entry (day trips) and management costs (e.g., advertising costs). However, the funding is not available for capital costs or offsite residentials and food parcels are not routinely funded unless required to avoid food waste or those attending choose to take food home.⁷³

Glasgow City Council's monitoring report, 2024 (Summer and October), highlights the challenge of being oversubscribed, an increase in the number of young people attending with Additional Support Needs (ASN) often without advanced warning, the formation of ethnic-based groups requiring cultural exchange sessions to share stories and traditions, and escalating food costs. Enabling factors were found to include partnership working to ensure services were not duplicated and referrals made to other providers when organisations were at capacity, knowledge sharing workshops between providers to share 'what worked well'. Parents reported reduced stress from knowing their child was safe, and fed. While the young people enjoyed trying new foods and activities, connected with friends and the wider community, developed confidence from learning new skills and appreciated going on excursions to new places.⁷⁴

Wales

The School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP) managed by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) is promoted under the brand 'Food and Fun'. Initially piloted by Cardiff City Council in 2015, SHEP is now a pan-Wales school-based scheme to provide meals, food and nutrition education, activities in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, for a minimum of 12 days over the summer months.⁷⁵ Participating schools are required to have a minimum 16% of learners entitled to Free School Meals with local authorities managing applications during January/ February each year for cohorts of up to 40 children.⁷⁶

71 Foundation Scotland (2025), '[Nourish the Nation Summer Food and Activity Programme](#)'

72 Glasgow City Council (2025), '[Glasgow's Holiday Programme Guidance Notes](#)'

73 Ibid

74 Glasgow City Council (2024), '[Glasgow Children's Holiday Food and Activity Programme](#)',

75 Welsh Government (2025), '[School Holiday Enrichment Programme \(SHEP\): interim report](#)'

76 Ibid

'Food and Fun' aligns with international, national and local agenda's focused on alleviating the symptoms of food poverty and underpins the *UN Convention on Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* and *Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011*, the *Wellbeing of the Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*, and the *Child Poverty Strategy for Wales (2024)*, amongst others.⁷⁷ The WLGA coordinates the scheme on behalf of the Welsh Government with input from a National Steering Group while individual councils provide a named contact and facilitate a local steering group featuring partners from sports development, healthy school officers, family liaison and welfare officers, supported by national partners such as the Welsh Rugby Union, Deaf Friendly, and Literature Wales.⁷⁸ Local Health Boards provide accredited community food and nutrition training for staff, developed and delivered by registered dietitians and additional training days are held to demonstrate nutrition resources and activities. In addition, a set of bespoke menu principles were developed for the programme, under annual review, delivered by school catering teams.⁷⁹

The summary of findings within the 2024 WGLA 'Food and Fun' evaluation report notes young people felt connected seeing friends/ peers, enjoyed the sports, activities and skills sessions and exposure to new foods; meanwhile, parents benefited from informal learning opportunities and the sharing of learning at home and enhanced family engagement by attending sessions with their child. Head teachers reported improved attendance in September from young people participating in 'Food and Fun', enhanced relationships with learners and their families and improved ongoing school/ family engagement.⁸⁰

In 2025, SHEP celebrated its ten-year anniversary with funding of over £5.8 million to be shared across 22 local authorities, 230 schools providing 14,000 free places for young people per day from Years 3 to 8 (~7 to 13 years).⁸¹ Julie Morgan MS, Welsh politician, led a review of SHEP in 2024, producing an interim report in March 2025 which supported the beneficial effects on relationships between young people, families and the school, with improved term time attendance post-summer.⁸² Challenges raised by SHEP stakeholders included the lack of staff support, late notice of school works over summer months, and the view that success was dependent on the enthusiasm of those running the scheme. Key recommendations from the interim report include raising awareness to maximise participation (in 2024 only 305 schools out of 1500 participated), effective planning to avoid duplication with Playworks Holiday Project provision (see section below), move to a multi-year funding cycle to increase certainty and allow longer term

77 Welsh Local Government Association (2025), '[Food and Fun Evaluation Report](#)'

78 *ibid*

79 *ibid*

80 *ibid*

81 Welsh Government (2025), '[Ten-year milestone for 'Food and Fun' summer holiday scheme](#)'

82 Welsh Government (2025), '[School Holiday Enrichment Programme \(SHEP\): interim report](#)'

strategic planning including staff recruitment and training, facilitate the sharing of best practice across authorities and recognition of programme success and the efforts of staff and volunteers involved in delivery.⁸³

The Playworks Holiday Project is a 'holiday hunger' initiative for young people aged 0 to 17 years, combining play opportunities alongside the provision of healthy food and complements the 'Food and Fun' programme to reduce financial burden on families during holiday periods (Easter, Summer, Christmas and half term breaks).⁸⁴ Funding for Playworks is open access but is focused within vulnerable communities with professionals targeting known individuals to encourage participation. A ministerial review published in February 2025 noted an annual award of £1million per annum across 22 local authorities, through grant funding since inception to enable play opportunities and food provision during school holidays.⁸⁵

A 2019 evaluation of the Holiday Hunger Playworks Pilot advised that different food models were tested, from ordering in food to purchasing of equipment to prepare meals in house, either adding to the existing provision or improving the food available.⁸⁶ Funding the provision of food at Playwork schemes was seen as effective alongside funding places for young people not normally able to attend out of school clubs, providing them with opportunities to access food, receive education on healthy eating while sustaining the out of school childcare and holiday provision.⁸⁷

The most recent evaluation of the Playworks Holiday Project was published in 2022 for the period 2021 – 2022, highlighting that programmes were delivered in different settings including open spaces (parks/ forests), community spaces, sports facilities, leisure centres, schools and family centres.⁸⁸ Funding for food delivery under the Playworks initiative is flexible with each local authority expected to provide some provision of food/ healthy snacks with the caveat that a hot meal was not a necessity. Equipment such as refrigeration, cooler boxes, reusable drinking bottles could be purchased, staff costs could be covered to ensure food provision did not detract from play activities, and training could be funded in relation to food hygiene and healthy eating education for staff.⁸⁹

'Fit and Fed' is a further initiative delivered by Street Games in two Welsh clusters (Swansea and Denbighshire) and one English cluster (Plymouth) through a network of sporting clubs, youth centres, community groups and schools. This

83 lbid

84 Playworks Holiday Project (2025 to 2026), '[Guidance for Local Authorities](#)'

85 Welsh Government (2025), '[Ministerial review of play progress report: February 2025](#)'

86 Welsh Government (2019), '[Holiday Hunger Playworks Pilot 2019](#)' (Executive Summary)

87 lbid

88 Welsh Government (2022), '[Evaluation of the Playworks Holiday Project 2021/22](#)'

89 Welsh Government (2025), '[Playworks Holiday Project 2025 – 26, Guidance for Local Authorities](#)'

initiative is funded by the Pears Foundation to provide opportunities for physical activity alongside food provision outside of school and the school holidays.⁹⁰ *The StreetGames Fit and Fed Annual report 2023/24* highlights that the combination of food and activity is a means of increasing engagement with underserved young people and their families from low-income areas and a means of providing other forms of interventions and additional support during the holiday periods.⁹¹ For those involved in delivering the programme there is a recognised benefit from receiving training and qualifications from the National Skills Academy, including food safety level 2, HACCP, Health and Safety Level 2 and Allergen Awareness.⁹²

Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Executive, Department of Education, up to March 2023 provided a School Holiday Food Grant to families of young people entitled to free school meals, equating to £13.50 per week for each child.⁹³ Due to budgetary pressures, from 1st April 2023 the Department announced they were no longer able to fund the scheme due to a funding gap of ~£382million with an education budget cut by 2.5%.⁹⁴

In 2024, Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), including Danny Baker MLA issued a motion to review the eligibility for free school meals and called for recognition of the impact the withdrawal of the food grants on the most vulnerable young people in society, as well as the need for a comprehensive plan to end 'holiday hunger'.⁹⁵

In March 2025, Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) confirmed continued National Lottery Community funding for their 'Gets Active Holiday Hunger Project', which is a range of holiday programmes providing food and activities to >10,000 young people in partnership with community organisations and youth centres including Oasis Youth and Patrician Youth Centre.⁹⁶ CiNI is an umbrella organisation for the Northern Ireland Children's sector which campaigns for measures to address childhood food insecurity, including the coordination of a two-week pilot 'Kilkeel Gets Active Youth Summer Programme' in August 2016 with 15 young people

aged 12 – 16 years which included activities, lunch sessions and an Open College Network accredited award for Healthy Living for participants.⁹⁷

90 Street Games (2025), "[*Fit and Fed*](#)"

91 Fit and Fed (2025), "[*Fit and Fed Delivery Annual Report 2023 – 24*](#)"

92 *Ibid*

93 Department of Education (2022), "[*McIlveen announces £12.6m summer holiday food grant*](#)"

94 Department of Education (2023), "[*DoE protects funding for vulnerable children and young people*](#)"

95 [*Northern Ireland Assembly \(2024\), 'Motion: End Holiday Hunger'*](#)

96 Children in Northern Ireland (2025). "[*CiNI Awarded Lottery Funds to Support Gets Active Project*](#)"

97 *Ibid*

In 2019, an evaluation of the CiNI Summer holiday projects noted food provision was limited by the lack of staff with formal catering qualifications and inadequate or absence of kitchen facilities. However, through the provision of meals, holiday clubs were able to reduce the amount of 'non-core foods and drinks' (based on the Australian Dietary Guidelines) consumed during the project weeks, including processed meat, baked goods, confectionary and sugar sweetened beverages such as energy drinks.⁹⁸

Finland

Finland was the first provider of universal free school meals with legal provision making fresh, mainly hot meals compulsory in preparatory, primary and secondary schools (age 6 – 19 years) providing at least 1/3 of young people's dietary requirements.⁹⁹ Almost 850,000 pupils benefit from free school meals with additional snacks provided at before and after school activities and school clubs.¹⁰⁰

To combat holiday hardship following cuts in social security and changes in eligibility for housing benefits for low-income families, local councils in Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa, Tampere and Oulu, operate free summertime park lunch programmes.¹⁰¹ In addition, local schools utilise their playground spaces to offer free hot lunches on weekdays for young people under the age of 16, based on the wartime tradition of 'playground meals' due to food shortages. Meals include soups and stews with the addition of vegetarian / vegan alternatives, with young people asked to bring their own plates and cutlery.¹⁰²

Portugal

In Portugal, School Social Action (SSE) is a state-run programme targeted at low-income families with support provided based on family allowance brackets with students with refugee status automatically included. During the Christmas and Easter holidays schools continue to serve meals to those known to social services and these young people are also eligible for a free breakfast across the school calendar.¹⁰³

98 Children in Northern Ireland (2020), '[An Evaluation of Children in Northern Ireland's Summer 2019 Holiday Provision](#)'

99 Department of Social Protection (2022), '[Evaluation of School Meals Programme](#)'

100 Finnish National Agency for Education (unknown), '[School Meals in Finland](#)'

101 Helsinki Times (2025), '[Summer holidays increase pressure on low-income families in Finland](#)' (8th June 2025)

102 Nice News (2022), '[Humanity News Report](#)'

103 Saldo Posi+ivo (2025), '[School Social Action Support](#)'

Canada

Food Banks Canada's 'After the Bell' program aims to address food insecurity over the summer months through the provision of food packs including staple items of milk, oatmeal, crackers, cereal and perishable items including yoghurts, cheese, fresh fruits and vegetables supported by nutrition education activities (from young people age 9 – 11), with each local food bank determining the best distribution method and timing for their area from one pack over the summer to a pack every week.¹⁰⁴ In 2025, 215,000 food packs were distributed to 235 communities with the support of volunteers and funding from private organisations including Subway, Air Canada, Dr Oetker and KPMG and individual donations.¹⁰⁵

'Feeding the future' is Canada's largest free summer lunch programme, operated by Second Harvest, a food rescue organisation supported by a network of food, funds and service operators to provide sandwiches to young people attending free or subsidised summer camps.¹⁰⁶

'Food4Kids', a Canadian charity operates a summer programme including food bags and vouchers for food, alongside a weekend provision where food packs are discreetly placed in children's back packs to take home on a Friday, all programmes are fully funded by community donors and one-time grants due to a lack of core funding.¹⁰⁷

104 The Global FoodBanking Network (unknown), '[Canada: Food Banks Canada's After the Bell program provides summer meals](#)'

105 Foodbanks Canada (2025), '[After the Bell](#)'

106 Second Harvest (2025), '[Feeding our Future](#)'

107 Food4Kids (2025), '[Website: Programs](#)'

Annex B: Participating Youth Services

Youth Service profiles

The following table provides a summary for the youth service organisation's participating in the summer meals pilot 2025 including the 16 sites visited by the Horizons research team.

No	Education Training Board Area	Youth Organisation	Catering for (number) per day	Model adopted	Existing Food Services	Funding provided (€)
1	Cork	Foróige Knocknaheeny Youth	50 - 60	External caterers	Yes	28,125
2	Waterford / Wexford	Ferns Diocesan Youth Service (FDYS)	40	External caterers / Food Parcels / Restaurant vouchers	Yes	27,125
3	Tipperary	Youth Work Ireland Tipperary	15 - 70	Onsite preparation including cooking sessions / Full board for camps	Yes	28,125
4	Limerick / Clare	Northside Family Resource Centre	40	Onsite preparation including cooking sessions / Trips to restaurants	Yes	14,840
5	Kerry	Kerry Diocesan Youth Service	24	External caterers	Yes	8,000
6	Longford / Westmeath	Youth Work Ireland Midlands	30	Onsite preparation / Restaurant visits	Yes	22,500
7	Louth / Meath	Boomerang Cafe	25	Onsite Cafe	Yes	15,480
8	Dublin Dun Laoghaire	Dublin Dun Laoghaire	80 - 120	Onsite preparation / External caterers	No	33,870
9	City of Dublin	Ballymun Regional Youth Resource	80	Onsite preparation	Yes	28,125
10	Kildare / Wicklow	InSync Youth and Family Service	20	Onsite preparation (cold lunch)	No	28,200
11	Kilkenny / Carlow	Carlow Regional Youth Service	10 - 146	Onsite preparation / Detached services	No	16,455

12	Loais / Offaly	Offaly Traveller Movement	20 - 40	External caterers	No	22,464
13	Galway / Roscommon	Bru Bhríde	30	External caterers	Yes	7,947
14	Mayo / Sligo / Leitrim	Foróige UBU South Slige	20 - 60	External caterers / Onsite preparation	No	28,000
15	Cavan / Monaghan	Include Youth Service	20	External caterers / Detached Services	Yes	28,125
16	Donegal	The Deck	8 - 15	External caterers / Onsite preparation	Yes	4,160
17	Dublin	Bradóg Youth Service	50	External caterers	No	25,200
18	Dublin	Ballyfermot Youth Service	50	External caterers	Yes	28,125
19	Donegal	Aspire Donegal	25	Onsite preparation	No	28,125
20	Louth / Meath	Dundalk Youth Centre	75	External Caterers	No	17,100
21	Longford / Westmeath	Gateway Youth Project	20 - 50	Onsite preparation and External Caterers	No	5,770
22	Mayo / Sligo / Leitrim	Involve Mayo	25	External Caterers	No	10,000
23	Kilkenny	Ossary Youth Gateway	20 - 25	Onsite preparation	No	6,890
					Total Funding	€462,840

The Youth Service profiles are based on:

- ➔ Service requirement outlines provided by the ETBI for individual or clustered youth services when applying for grant funding through the Targeted Youth Funding Scheme entitled UBU - Your Place Your Space
- ➔ Youth service applications to participate in the summer meals 2025 pilot
- ➔ Information provided by representatives of the youth service organisations during onsite visits by the Horizons research team and advance check-ins over video or telephone.

For some youth services food provision was not new and would be provided from core funding during term time and during holidays. However, this provision varied in scope from the distribution of food items from local retailers, to having provisions on hand for young people to make a toastie on the grill after school to having a professional kitchen with a part-time chef preparing meals.

The location of food provision was also varied during the holiday weeks, and this could change week to week or even day to day depending on the weather. All of the youth services have a core venue, including family centres. However, activities also took place in sports venues for football, parks for family BBQs, beaches for surfing or supping along with day trips with access to an onsite cafe or picnic area or perhaps a stop-off at a local eatery on the way home.

The full list of participating sites for the Summer Meals 2025 can be found [here](#).

Annex C: Data Collection Tools

Research Questions for site visits

Was a menu or food order available?
Budget/ costings
Attendance numbers?
Data on how they do internal evaluation?
What difference/ impact does having funding to provide summer meals have on the youth service?
What food model have you selected and why?
What have been the secondary consequences/ social impact from the food provision?
How do you assess presence and prevalence of food hunger? (How have you responded (feeding siblings etc, food home?))
What challenges have you faced in the delivery of the programme as prescribed by the pilot?
How has the pilot impacted demand for the service?
How does the pilot align with summer programme activities?
Any challenges realising the nutritional and quality standards of food provided?
Noticed any (+/-) peer pressure or discussions around food/ other cultural dishes/ new food?
How are you assessing success?
Do you have suggestions for improving the design and delivery of the funding provision, if extended?
How do you go about the procurement process of suppliers?
Do you have policies and training in place regarding food hygiene and safety for food preparation?
What have been your food wastage plans? Has this been effective?
Are young people comfortable taking food home?
Do you think holiday hunger is prevalent? Any qualitative examples of how you know?

Any examples of how the clubs directly help? (How the YP present/ or material differences?)
What medium/ longer term differences can you imagine for YP and their families, if this pilot is extended?
What are the meal options today?
What choices are YP making about food/ snacks?
What demand is there for adaptations - eg, vegan, allergies etc
How much are YP consuming? Is there plate waste? Are some menu options ignored?
Do young people comment on the food?
What access is there to the kitchen, serving area, if at the main site?
What access is there to dining facilities? Staggered serving etc?
How involved are the young people in prep, cleaning up etc.
What do you think about the meal and snacks here?
What would you like to see more/ less of on the menu?
Have you tried anything new here/ at home?
What difference does it make having food at the club?
Has the pilot sparked any interest in cooking/ food sources/ sustainability ?
Is the food here different to meals served at school/ or what your get at home/ packed lunches?

Topic Guide for Youth Workers

Basic information

- ➔ It would be good to understand the **age range** and **gender** of the young people responding

[Prompt – age 9 – 12years, 3 – 18 years or outwith (younger or older siblings) and gender]

- ➔ How did you **travel**/get to the club today?

[Prompt – walked, bus, dropped off]

- ➔ What do you **enjoy** most about going to the youth club?

[Prompt with examples if needed - the activities, the food, seeing friends, having fun, meeting new people, mixing with other schools, cultures or backgrounds, brings the community together during the holidays....]

- ➔ What **difference** does having a holiday club to go to during the summer holidays or How would you feel if there was no holiday club to attend during the summer? (**?take a +/- stance**)

[Prompt with examples: something to do over the holidays, stops me from being bored or lonely, gives me self-confidence, gain new skills or learn new things, gives access to activities otherwise unavailable, gets me out of the house/bedroom, safe social place to go, saves money, gives parents/carers a break/chance to do other things....]

Meal / Snack provision

- ➔ What do you think about the **meals and snacks** being offered at the youth service?

[Prompt – enjoyment, tastiness, portion size, nutritional quality ‘healthy’, choice on the day or ability to pre-order/influence provision]

- ➔ Are there food or drink options you would like to see **more or less** of on the menu?

[Prompts will depend on what is being offered – meat / vegetarian dishes, fruit and veg / salad, dairy, carbohydrates (pasta, rice, potatoes), discretionary foods (cakes, sweets, take-away...)]

- ➔ Have you tried any **new foods** or combinations of foods by coming to the youth service or experienced different ways of having foods/drinks / Are

you trying new foods at home or elsewhere after having something new or tasty at the holiday club?

[Prompt with examples from your menu: fruit smoothies – adding veg or milk/yoghurt to a smoothie.....]

- ➔ What **difference** does having meals/snacks available during sessions make to coming along to the youth service?

[Prompt – enjoy sitting down with friends, don't having to think about or bring food along, gives structure or routine to eating over the holidays, saves money that you or your family can spend on other things, more likely to come along (increased attendance)...]

- ➔ What would you be having to eat/drink today if you were not at the club?

[Prompt – meal at home, buy a 'meal deal' / take-away from a food outlet / skip breakfast/lunch or dinner / meal at a family or friends house...]

- ➔ Are you **saving money / have spare cash** by having meals at the club?

[Prompt - Breakfast provided at the youth service (not having to buy food from other places on the way?)]

- ➔ Has the meal provision **sparked your interest in food, nutrition or cooking?** (if the young people have been involved in food selection, preparation, learning about food/nutrition)

[Prompt – keen to do more cooking, enjoy having a say in selecting the food options, enjoyed the nutrition education or would like to know more, would like to visit a farm or learn more about how food is produced]

If there is time and interest, please go on to discuss these more detailed questions

Diet and lifestyle (*alternative approach to the youth work survey covering nutrition/activity*)

- ➔ Chat a bit about what kinds of foods they've been eating recently - like over the past few months. There's no right or wrong answer

[Prompt – if appropriate, ask how often they usually eat or drink [category listed below] -

Use these categories and examples to prompt the young person:

- ➔ **Snacks & Fast Foods**
(e.g. crisps, chocolate, burger & chips)
- ➔ **Cereals, Breads, Potatoes, Pasta & Rice**
(e.g. cereal, toast, pitta, noodles)
- ➔ **Milk, Yogurt & Cheese**
(e.g. a glass of milk, a yoghurt, cheese)
- ➔ **Meat, Poultry, Fish, Eggs, Beans & Nuts**
(e.g. chicken, eggs, baked beans, nuts)
- ➔ **Vegetables, Salads & Fruit**
(e.g. apples, grapes, salad, smoothies)
- ➔ **Fats, Spreads & Oils**
(e.g. butter, mayo, oil used in cooking)
- ➔ Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about the youth club, or what you've been eating or doing over the summer? [Prompt - "Has anything changed?" or "Is there anything you'd like to see more of?"] [ENDS]

Template for completion by youth worker

(we would be grateful if you could summarise all discussions with your young people, ideally highlighting any differences you note in the answers between boys and girls and between different age groups)

Basic information

Girls:	Number of 9 – 12 year old:	Number of 13 – 18 year old:	Prefer not to say:
Boys:	Number of 9 – 12 year old:	Number of 13 – 18 year old:	Prefer not to say:
What do you enjoy most about going to the youth club?			
What difference does having a holiday club to go to during the summer holidays? (How would they feel if there was no holiday club?)			
Meal / Snack provision (thoughts on the food provided)			
What difference do young people think the summer meals has had on what they eat? (eg, will now try new foods I didn't before, +/- likely to eat healthier foods now?)			

Young People's Survey - Holiday Meals Pilot evaluation

When you submit this form, it will not automatically collect your details like name and email address unless you provide it yourself.

About this survey

Hi! We're part of a research team looking at the food you get in youth clubs like yours across Ireland. As part of this, we want to learn more about what young people aged 10 to 18 enjoy - the kinds of food you eat and how often.

This survey should only take a few minutes to fill in. There are no right or wrong answers - we're just interested in your experience.

If you have any questions, you can speak to your youth worker, or feel free to visit our website at www.horizonsresearch.org for more information about us.

Thanks for taking part!

1. What summer holiday youth club do you go to?

2. What do you like about going to the youth club?

The activities

The food

Seeing your friends

Meeting new people

3. What age category do you fit into?

9 - 12 years old

13 - 18 years old

Other

4. Snacks & Fast Foods (example portions: individual packet of crisps, chocolate bar with 8 pieces, or burger and chips from a fast food outlet/ restaurant)

	Never	Once a month	Once every 2 weeks	1 - 2 times per week	3 - 6 times per week	Once a day	More than once a day
Crisps or salty snacks (examples - pretzels, salted nuts, salted popcorn)							
Sweets, chocolate or ice cream							
Biscuits, cakes or pastries							
Fizzy or sugary/ sweetened drinks							
Fast foods from an outlet or van (examples - burger & chips, kebab, Chinese food, pizza slices)							

5. Cereals & Breads, Potatoes, Pasta & Rice (example portions: one pitta pocket, one cup of cereal, one cup of cooked pasta, rice or noodles, two medium potatoes)

	Never	Once a month	Once every 2 weeks	1 – 2 times per week	3 – 6 times per week	Once a day	More than once a day
Bread or similar (examples – roll, toast, wrap, pitta, hardoo, roti, injera, chapatti, fufu)							
Porridge of cereal (examples – oats, granola, idli, dosa)							
Potatoes, yam or plantain							
Rice, pasta, noodles, cous cous							
Crackers, oatcakes or ricecakes							

6. Milk, Yogurt & Cheese (example portions: one glass of milk, one carton of yoghurt, matchbox size piece of cheese)

	Never	Once a month	Once every 2 weeks	1 – 2 times per week	3 – 6 times per week	Once a day	More than once a day
Milk or milky drinks (glass or in cereal / smoothie)							
Dairy free (examples – oat, soya or almond milk) (glass or in cereal/ smoothie)							
Yoghurt (drink or pot)							
Cheese							

7. Meat, Poultry, Fish, Eggs, Beans & Nuts (example portions: palm sized chicken breast, two eggs or a small handful of nuts)

	Never	Once a month	Once every 2 weeks	1 – 2 times per week	3 – 6 times per week	Once a day	More than once a day
Chicken, turkey, beef, lamb							
Sausages, bacon or ham							
Fish or seafood (excluding Oily Fish)							
Oily fish (examples – salmon, sardines, anchovies, mackerel, trout, herring)							
Eggs							
Beans, lentils or chickpeas/ hummus							
Nuts (examples – cashew nuts (not salted), seeds (pumpkins seeds) or nut butters)							

8. Vegetables, Salad & Fruit (example portions: one large (apple) or two small pieces of fruit (plums), handful of grapes or strawberries, small bowl of salad, bowl of vegetable soup, small glass of fresh juice or homemade smoothie)

	Never	Once a month	Once every 2 weeks	1 – 2 times per week	3 – 6 times per week	Once a day	More than once a day
Fruit							
Salad							
Vegetables							
Fruit Juice (fresh or smoothie)							

9. Fats, Spreads & Oils (example portions: one portion pack of butter for two slices of bread or one level tablespoon of mayonnaise)

	Never	Once a month	Once every 2 weeks	1 – 2 times per week	3 – 6 times per week	Once a day	More than once a day
Butter, lard or ghee							
Mayonnaise or salad dressing							
'Low fat' spread							
Cream or Crème Fraiche							
Oil when cooking – rapeseed, olive, canola, sunflower or corn oil							
Oil when cooking – coconut or palm oil							

10. Did we catch everything? Would you like to say anything more about what you like to eat and how often you have these foods?

11. Do you follow a specific diet (for example vegetarian, vegan, halal, kosher)

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

12. What gender do you identify with?

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say

13. How active are you each day? (examples – walking, wheeling, running or playing sports)

Not active

30 minutes activity

60 minutes activity

More than 60 minutes a day

Don't know

14. How many day(s) a week do you do strength exercise? (examples – climbing or body weight exercises)

Not at all

One day

Two days

Three days

Four days or more

Don't know

15. Finally, is there anything else you'd like to tell us about going to the summer holiday youth club or eating and drinking over the summer holidays?

Youth Service Worker Survey - Holiday Meals Pilot evaluation

About this survey

Hello, and thank you for taking the time to support our research. We're part of a team evaluating the Summer Holiday Meals Pilot taking place across youth clubs in Ireland.

This short survey is aimed at people working for youth services involved in delivering the programme. We'd like to hear your views on areas including the aims of the pilot, the level of need in your area, what you feel the impacts of the pilot may be, and any wider issues affecting the young people you work with.

The survey should take around 10-15 minutes to complete. All information you provide will be anonymised and used only for research purposes.

If you have any questions, please feel free to get in touch at enquiries@horizonsresearch.org, or visit our website at www.horizonsresearch.org for more information about us.

1. What is your name?

2. What is your current role?

3. What is your ETB area?

Cavan and Monaghan ETB

City of Dublin ETB

Cork ETB

Donegal ETB

Dublin and Dun Laoghaire ETB

Galway and Roscommon ETB

Kerry ETB

Kildare and Wicklow ETB

Kilkenny and Carlow ETB

Laois and Offaly ETB

Limerick and Clare ETB

Longford and Westmeath ETB

Louth and Meath ETB

Mayo Sligo and Leitrim ETB

Tipperary ETB

Waterford and Wexford ETB

4.What is your Affiliated Youth Service?

Include Youth Service
Foroige Knocknaheeny Youth
Donegal Youth Service
The DECK
DDLETB
Bru Bride
Kerry Community Youth Service
In Sync
Ossory Youth
Carlow Regional Youth Service
Offaly Traveller Movement
Northside Family Resource Centre
Athlone Youth Project
Foróige Gateway Project
Dundalk Youth Centre
Drogheda Youth Development
Involve Youth Service Ballina
Foroige UBU South Sligo
YWI Tipperary
FDYS-Enniscorthy
Ballymun Regional Youth Resource
Bradóg Youth service
Ballyfermot Youth Service

5.What is your understanding of the aims of the Summer Holiday Meals programme?

6.What do you feel the level of need is for the Summer Holiday Meals programme amongst young people in your local area?

High level of need
Medium level of need
Low level of need
Not sure

7. What kinds of challenges might the young people attending the programme, and their families, be facing in their lives more generally?

8. Have you received training or guidance on food provision, dietary needs, nutrition standards, or food safety related to meals?

Yes

No

Don't know

9. If Yes, please tell us about any training or guidance you received.

10. How prepared do you feel to support meal delivery within your summer activities?

Very prepared

Somewhat prepared

Not well prepared

Don't know

11. Please provide any further comments below on how prepared you feel to support meal delivery within your summer activities.

12. As you begin activities, what kind of support or resources do you feel would help you deliver this programme well?

13. Have you experienced any issues/ difficulties with food provision relating to kitchen facilities for meal preparation and dining spaces for eating? Required to answer.

Yes

No

14. If Yes, please describe any issues or difficulties you have experienced in this area.

15. Have you had to adjust your staffing/ volunteer levels to be able to accommodate the meal/snack provision?

Yes

No

16. If Yes, please describe how you have adjusted your staffing/ volunteer levels.

17. How will meals be integrated into your youth work activities?

Communal meals

Packed lunches for outside activities

Informal snacks

Structured eating times

18. What challenges do you foresee (e.g. time, space, food waste, participant engagement, young people's food preferences)?

19. How do you think access to meals will influence young people's wellbeing?

It will have a large impact

It will have a moderate impact

It will have a small impact

It will have no real impact

Don't know

20. Please provide any further comments on how you think access to meals will influence young people's wellbeing.

21. How do you think access to meals will influence young people's engagement in summer activities?

It will have a large impact

It will have a moderate impact

It will have a small impact

It will have no real impact

Don't know

22. Please provide any further comments on how you think access to meals will influence young people's engagement in summer activities.

23. Do you expect the meals to affect your ability to deliver other youth work activities?

Yes

No

Don't know

24. Please provide any further comments on how you expect the meals to affect your ability to deliver other youth work activities.

25. Are there any concerns from young people or families that you are aware of in relation to the Summer Holiday Meals pilot programme? Required to answer.

Yes

No

Don't know

26. If Yes, please provide further any information on these concerns.

27. What would you want to feed back to programme designers or funders at this stage?

28. Is there anything else you would like to let us know about?

29. Finally, would you be willing to take part in a short semi-structured interview later in the summer to discuss your thoughts and experiences of the pilot? Required to answer. Single choice.

Yes

No

30. If Yes, please provide your email address below.

ETB Survey - Holiday Meals Pilot evaluation

Hello, and thank you for taking the time to support our research. We're part of a team evaluating the Summer Holiday Meals Pilot taking place across youth clubs in Ireland.

This short survey is aimed at ETBs involved in the pilot. We'd like to hear your views on areas including your expectations of the pilot, what you feel the impacts of the pilot may be, and any barriers or enabling factors you anticipate regarding the delivery of the pilot.

The survey should take around 10-15 minutes to complete. All information you provide will be anonymised and used only for research purposes.

If you have any questions, please feel free to get in touch at enquiries@horizonsresearch.org, or visit our website at www.horizonsresearch.org for more information about us.

1. What is your name?

2. What is your ETB area?

Cavan and Monaghan ETB

City of Dublin ETB

Cork ETB

Donegal ETB

Dublin and Dun Laoghaire ETB

Galway and Roscommon ETB

Kerry ETB

Kildare and Wicklow ETB

Kilkenny and Carlow ETB

Laois and Offaly ETB

Limerick and Clare ETB

Longford and Westmeath ETB

Louth and Meath ETB

Mayo Sligo and Leitrim ETB

Tipperary ETB

Waterford and Wexford ETB

3. What is your email address?

4. What are the expectations of your ETB in taking part in the Summer Holiday Meals pilot?

5. Looking at the guidance and programme design for the pilot, what challenges did your ETB encounter?

6. What recommendations do you have regarding any future iterations of the programme?

7. Thinking about the budget available in line with the overall budget for UBUs, was it too much or too little?

Too much

Too little

Don't know

8. What staff, facilities, or partnerships are in place to support delivery of the summer meals programme? (For example, partnerships with local catering companies).

9. Are there aspects of your partnership that you see as enabling successful delivery?

10. Do you anticipate any particular barriers to delivering the summer meals programme effectively?

11. What do you expect the impact of the meals to be on young people's wellbeing or participation?

12. What are your expectations around the time, cost, and effort required to deliver the food element?

13. Are there any risks or unintended consequences you are concerned about?

14. What would success look like for you by the end of the pilot?

15. Is there anything you hope to learn from this programme that would influence future delivery?

16. Later in the evaluation process, we intend to reach out to wider stakeholders involved in the design and delivery of the programme. Which relevant organisations and roles should we consider contacting?

17. Any other comments at this stage?

Topic Guide for Semi-Structured Interviews Interview via Teams (~45 minutes)

Preamble

Hi, my name is xxx, and I'm a xxx at Horizons. We're an independent research consultancy. It may be helpful if I provide some background on this project before we begin.

As you may be aware, Horizons is conducting an evaluation of the 2025 Holiday Meals Pilot Programme in collaboration with Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI). Just to remind you of the overall objectives for our evaluation: -

Measure the prevalence and impact of holiday hunger amongst young people attending youth work programmes;

Evaluate the impact of the Holiday Meals Programme on nutritional intake and wellbeing amongst participating young people;

Identify barriers and enablers for effective delivery as experienced by youth work programmes;

Explore the unintended consequences and cost-effectiveness of the pilot programme;

Assess the models of food provision that worked best.

Gather stakeholder feedback from youth, parents, workers, and ETBs

Before I ask for your agreement to participate in this research, I'd like to tell you a bit about how your information will be used.

The information you provide will be anonymised, which means your name and any identifiable details will not be used in our report. You can retract any information you provide up to 15 October 2025 (when we will submit our draft final report), and you don't need to give a reason.

During the interview, if you prefer not to answer any of the questions, please be aware that you don't have to, and we can proceed. Finally, our data processing and management are fully compliant with the Data Protection Act and GDPR.

If that's all clear and alright with you, are you happy to proceed with the interview? It should take approximately 45 minutes.

[wait for acknowledgement]

And can I record the interview? This is only to help me write notes/transcribe afterwards. I will then delete the recording.

[wait for acknowledgement]

Do you have any questions before we begin?

[potential interviewee responds]

Thank you.

Introductory and background information

In the coming 45 mins, I'd like us to explore some specific themes with you:

Overall policy context for the summer meals programme

Effectiveness of the pilot programme 2025

Implementation and delivery, governance

Policy alignment, strategic fit

But first, let's start and get you talking...

1. Do you want to say who you are and a little about the work you do / that of your organisation?

2. From your perspective, what was the main need / value / purpose of the pilot?

Context

3. How significant do you think the problem of holiday hunger/ food insecurity among children and young people in Ireland?

4. How do you see this pilot aligning with wider child poverty strategies, education policy, or youth work priorities? (Do interviewees detect a strong interest in aligning this with other work, budgets, multiplier effect? Chance to promote whole family wellbeing, for example. Is the system mature enough to make that work, or still siloed and fighting for money?)

5. What makes youth work settings a suitable or unsuitable place for meal provision?

Implementation and Delivery

6. How would you describe the effectiveness of the pilot design (funding model, eligibility, scope, timing)?

7. What do you see as the main strengths of how the programme was delivered in 2025?

8. From where you sat, what were the biggest challenges or barriers (e.g. staffing, facilities, procurement, nutrition standards)?

9. From your perspective, what were the key enabling factors (e.g. partnerships, flexibility, trust)?

10. Have you noticed any unintended consequences, positive or negative?

11. How do you assess the value for money / cost-effectiveness of this type of intervention?

Strategy, policy alignment and future delivery

12. (if not answered at (4) - How should/ could this pilot connect with other programmes (e.g. School Meals Scheme, Healthy Ireland), if at all?

13. To what extent does this programme contribute to national objectives on child poverty reduction, wellbeing, and equality? (another chance if you don't have anything on this, yet)

14. In your view, should the pilot be continued, scaled, or redesigned? Why?

15. If the pilot were to be rolled out, what role would you see for your organisation?

Follow-up - if this were to be rolled out, what do you think the most sensible and effective coordination mechanism would be? (e.g., through EBTI, directly with Dept? Some other organisation, cross-sector partnerships with youth work, education, health, and local authorities?)

16. One key bit of feedback from the practitioners and managers in sites was the plea for the summer meals budget to be made as part of their overall grant – so they can manage food provision across the year, for different holidays. How feasible do you think that is/ barriers to that working?

17. What risks do you foresee if the programme is not sustained or expanded?

18. We heard from the sites in need of support for delivery on this programme, if it was to continue (training, resources, staffing, partnerships)? What do you think would be important to put in place? Who should be driving that?

Closing Questions

19. Is there anything we haven't covered that you think is important for understanding the pilot's role or potential?

20. What is the single most important message you'd like us to take forward to decision makers?

Annex D:

Full analysis of survey data

Youth Service Worker Survey and Education Training Board Representative Survey

1. Respondent profiles

Youth Service Worker Survey

A total of 52 responses were received to the Youth Service Worker Survey. All 16 ETB areas were represented amongst the survey respondents: the ETB areas with the largest numbers of respondents were Cork ETB (8 respondents), Kilkenny and Carlow ETB (7 respondents) and Limerick and Clare ETB (7 respondents).

In addition, respondents were drawn from across 36 distinct Affiliated Youth Services. The youth services with the highest number of respondents were In Sync (6 respondents), Carlow Regional Youth Service (6 respondents) and Include Youth Service (3 respondents).

Finally, the majority of respondents (30) worked in frontline delivery roles in Youth Services, with job titles such as Youth Worker, Senior Youth Worker, Project Worker, Kitchen Assistant, and School Age Mental Health Workers. In addition, 18 respondents worked in more coordination and management-oriented roles, with job titles including Manager, Team Leader, Assistant Manager, Regional Manager and Project Coordinator.

ETB Survey

A total of 11 responses were received to the ETB Survey, drawn from across 11 ETB areas:

- ➔ Cavan and Monaghan ETB
- ➔ City of Dublin ETB
- ➔ Cork ETB
- ➔ Donegal ETB
- ➔ Kildare and Wicklow ETB
- ➔ Kilkenny and Carlow ETB
- ➔ Limerick and Clare ETB
- ➔ Longford and Westmeath ETB
- ➔ Louth and Meath ETB
- ➔ Tipperary ETB
- ➔ Waterford and Wexford ETB

2. Understanding and expectations of the Pilot

Youth Service Worker Survey

To begin, respondents to the Youth Service Worker Survey were asked to describe their understanding of the aims of the Summer Holiday Meals programme. Nearly all respondents (48 out of 52) highlighted providing food or nutrition to young people as a key aim of the pilot. Most of these respondents (26) further specifically highlighted addressing holiday hunger by providing this food during this summer months as a key aim. The other most common themes to emerge in response to this question were targeting disadvantage and need (17 respondents), including economic hardship, and supporting wellbeing amongst young people locally (15 respondents).

ETB Survey

Relatedly, ETB survey respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their expectations and hopes for the pilot. Respondents expected the pilot to provide food to young people during the holiday period, and consequently to help address poverty and need in their local areas. Respondents also felt that, if the pilot were successful, it would help increase engagement with youth services amongst young people and improve wellbeing, while not placing an undue burden on youth services in relation to time, cost and effort. In addition, respondents expressed hope that the learning to emerge from the pilot will help inform future efforts at addressing holiday hunger.

3. Level of need and contextual challenges

Youth Service Worker Survey

Next, survey respondents were asked their thoughts regarding the level of need for the pilot, as well as the kinds of challenges faced by the young people and families the pilot sought to reach. Amongst respondents to the Youth Service Worker Survey, 60% felt there was a high level of need amongst young people in their local areas, 38% felt there was a medium level of need, and 2% were not sure.

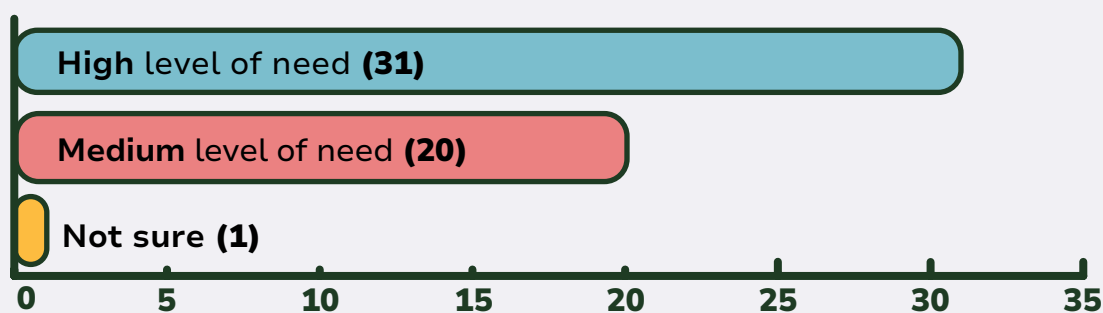


Figure 6: Responses to Youth Service Worker Survey, “What do you feel the level of need is for the Summer Holiday Meals programme amongst young people in your local area?”

With regards to the challenges faced by the young people attending the Summer Holiday Meals Programme, respondents described a range of issues including financial hardships, food insecurity, pressures faced by parents (such as precarious work environments), poor mental health and housing instability.

“A number of families that engage with our service are trying to survive on low income wages/ social welfare payments. Some families struggle to pay household bills and as a result are struggling to achieve a minimum standard of living.”

“[Our project] in an area of high disadvantage. Our families are experiencing homelessness, overcrowding in the home, poor literacy/ employment and addiction issues.”

A summary of the most common challenges cited by respondents is provided in **Figure 7** below; in addition to these, other challenges mentioned by respondents included issues relating to substance use and addiction, literacy, access to nutritional foods, discrimination, and exposure to abuse or criminal activity.

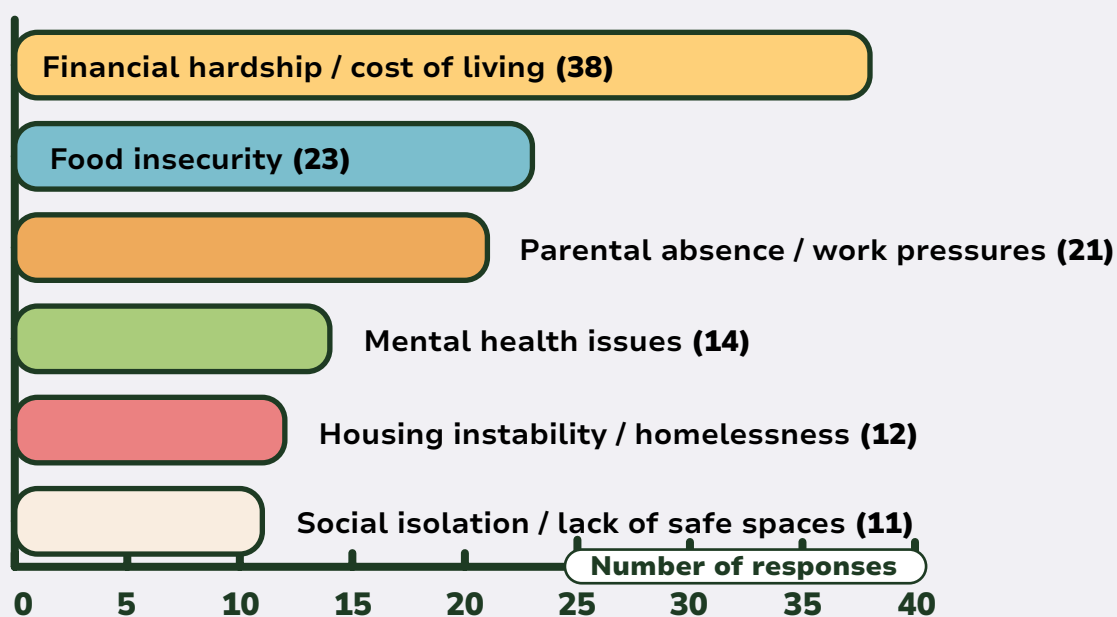


Figure 7: Responses to Youth Service Worker Survey, “What kinds of challenges might the young people attending the programme, and their families, be facing in their lives more generally?”

ETB Survey

ETB Survey respondents, meanwhile, were asked about any challenges their ETB had encountered with regards to the guidance and programme design for the pilot.

Here, a number of respondents highlighted problems they had identified with the initial guidance for the pilot, including that it was overly restrictive regarding the kinds of food to be provided (and how the food could be provided), and too limited in only allowing one programme to deliver the pilot per EBT area. Some respondents said they had struggled to find organisations in their area willing to take part in the pilot until the guidance was made more flexible. Other key challenges identified by ETB respondents included a lack of time provided to roll out the pilot in time for summer, and a lack of consultation with youth services or ETBs in the design of the pilot.

4. Operational readiness and practical delivery

Youth Service Worker Survey

Next, respondents were asked several questions relating to operational readiness and the practical delivery of the Summer Holiday Meals pilot.

Overall, 48% of respondents to the Youth Service Worker Survey stated that they had received training or guidance on food provision, dietary needs, nutrition standards, or food safety related to meals; while 40% said that they had not received training or guidance of this kind, and 12% were unsure. Amongst those who had received this, the most common kinds of training or guidance were HACCP training, specific sessions delivered by their ETB or the Department of Health relating to the pilot, and the Healthy Food Made Easy programme.

50% of respondents to this Survey said they felt very prepared to support meal delivery within their summer activities, while the remaining 50% said they felt somewhat prepared. Asked to provide any further comments, those who answered *“Very prepared”* described feeling confident in their ability to provide a wide range of meals to young people over the period, and having undertaken sufficient internal planning to put in place the necessary arrangements and partnerships to deliver this.

“I feel very prepared to support meal delivery within our summer activities. Our team has been improving every week, particularly in key areas such as meal preparation, portion control, organising activities, and ensuring appropriate supervision and staffing levels.”

Amongst those who answered *“Somewhat prepared”*, some respondents expressed uncertainty regarding the nutritional guidance for the pilot, while others explained that delivering the pilot would require a period of learning and adaption for their service with regards to the provision of food at this scale.

Respondents were then asked what kind of support or resources they felt would help them deliver this programme well. Key themes to emerge here included:

- ➔ **Additional training and guidance**, particularly around food safety, nutritional standards, and best practice for meal delivery
 - ➔ *“I would like to have a better understanding of nutrition, so some training would be beneficial.”*
- ➔ More support around the **food supply and logistics** required to provide meals
 - ➔ *“Having a catering company that the ETB found and approved of so we did not need to find our own.”*
- ➔ Particular types of **equipment or facilities** to help facilitate meal provision
 - ➔ *“Cooking utensils, space, BBQ, easy to follow recipes for the children.”*
 - ➔ *“I think having food warmers would be great as young people arrive to the service at different times.w”*
- ➔ More advice and support in relation to **menus and meal planning** to fit with both nutritional standards and young people’s tastes
 - ➔ *“Recipe books, meal planners designed for young people would be a helpful guide. Guidance on portion sizes for young people, what is the recommended size for a meal.”*

17% of respondents said they had experienced issues/ difficulties with food provision relating to kitchen facilities for meal preparation and dining spaces for eating, while 83% said they had not experienced any such issues. Amongst those who had, the most common issue described was having small or limited cooking space and kitchen facilities.

40% of respondents said their service had needed to adjust their staffing/ volunteer levels to be able to accommodate the meal/ snack provision, while 60% said they had not had to do so. For the most part, those who had adjusted described having increased their staffing and volunteer levels to accommodate the meal and snack provision, including through increasing the working hours of existing staff and hiring new summer support staff. Other respondents described adjusting staff rotas to ensure greater flexibility, and to ensure staff are onsite for food delivery times.

Respondents were then asked how meals would be integrated into their service’s youth work activities. A summary of the most common answers to this question are provided in **Figure 8** overleaf; as can be seen, the top response was *“Packed lunches for outside activities”*, followed by *“Communal meals”* and *“Informal snacks”*.

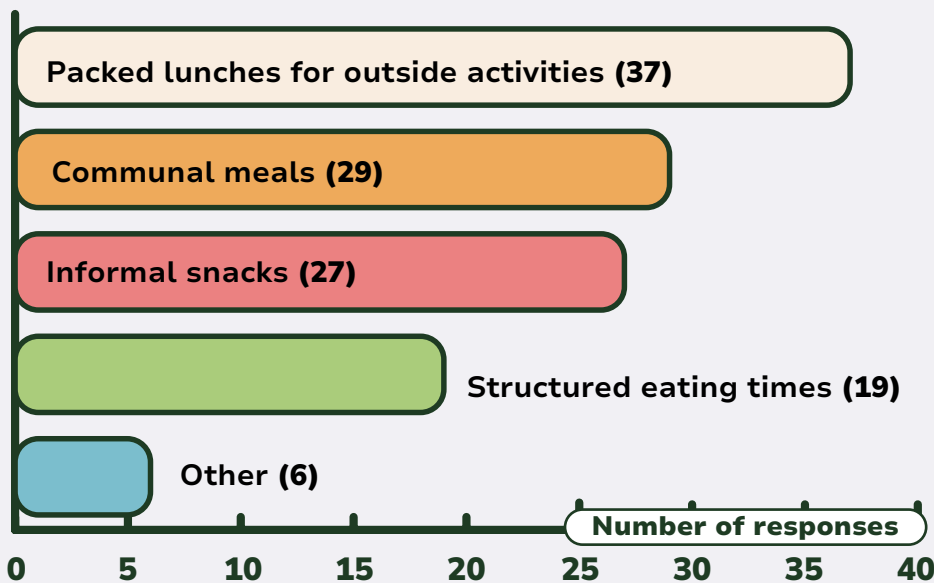


Figure 8: Responses to Youth Service Worker Survey, “How will meals be integrated into your youth work activities?”

In addition, respondents to the Youth Service Worker Survey were asked to describe any challenges they foresaw with regards to the Summer Holiday Meals pilot. Figure 9 below summarises the most common kinds of challenges identified by respondents.

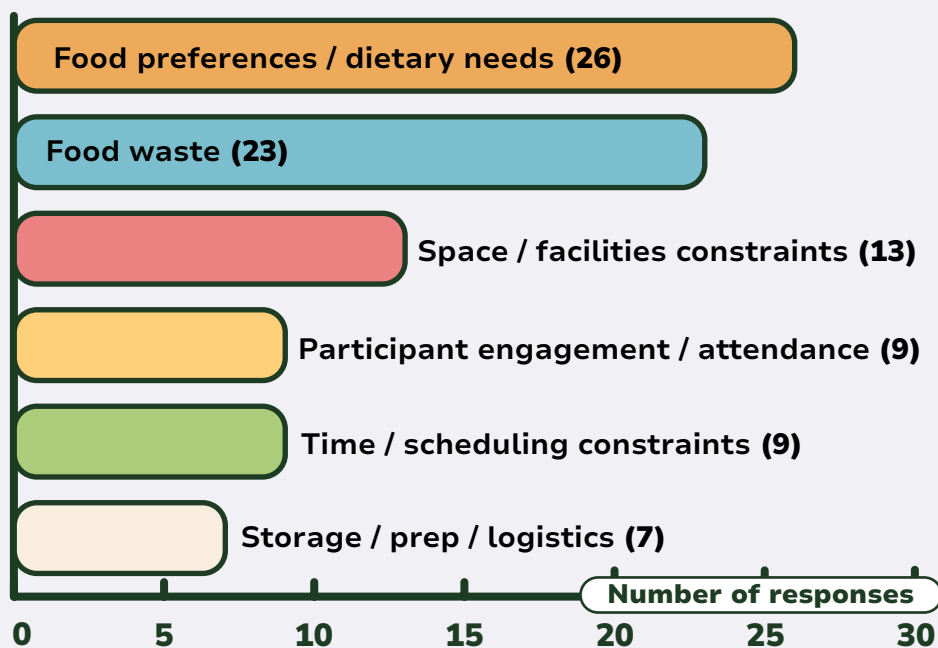


Figure 9: Thematic summary of most common responses to Youth Service Worker Survey, “What challenges do you foresee (e.g. time, space, food waste, participant engagement, young people’s food preferences)?”

As can be seen, half of the respondents (26) anticipated that they would experience challenges related to young people's food preferences or dietary needs, making this the most commonly identified challenge.

"The food preferences of young people will always be challenging, we try to offer a wide range of food choice whilst being mindful of waste and avoiding same."

"Food preferences, many young people do not have the confidence to try new foods, they take awhile to adjust to 'healthy' alternatives."

In addition, 23 respondents expected that they would experience challenges relating to food waste over the course of the pilot.

"Food waste is always a consideration, we try to eliminate this with clever ordering."

Some respondents explained that food waste would be a particular risk at the beginning of the pilot, while they sought to work out young people's food preferences and identify how best to meet their nutritional needs, individual preferences and dietary requirements.

ETB Survey

Relatedly, ETB survey respondents were asked what staff, facilities, or partnerships they had put in place to support delivery of the summer meals programme. Some respondents described arrangements that had been put in place with local caterers, shops or restaurants, while others said that putting in place these kinds of partnerships was more the role of the local funded youth organisations.

"One UBU has engaged the services of a local catering company who usually provide School Meals and the other has a functioning cafe on site, so will prepare the food there."

ETB respondents were then asked if there were any aspects of their partnership that they saw as enabling successful delivery. Here, respondents emphasised the importance of the strong and trusting existing relationships in place between ETBs and local youth work organisations as providing a strong foundation for the pilot to succeed.

"Knowledge and understanding of the local Funded Organisations - as we work with and support them throughout the year, the relationships that already exist will ensure that any issues arising should be surmountable"

Finally, ETB respondents were also asked about any barriers they anticipated with regards to the effective delivery of the summer meals programme. Possible barriers mentioned included the potential for variable attendance levels amongst young people over the summer months, and the potential need for additional

staffing capacity to help prepare meals and cover periods of annual leave. Two respondents said that the increased flexibility of the pilot in comparison to how it was initially advertised had made them feel more confident in the ability of projects to overcome potential barriers.

5. Impact on youth wellbeing and engagement

Youth Service Worker Survey

Respondents to the Youth Service Worker Survey were then asked how they thought access to meals through the pilot would influence young people's wellbeing. As shown in **Figure 10**, over two-thirds of respondents thought that access to meals would have a large impact on young people's wellbeing, while most of the remaining third thought that it would have a moderate impact.

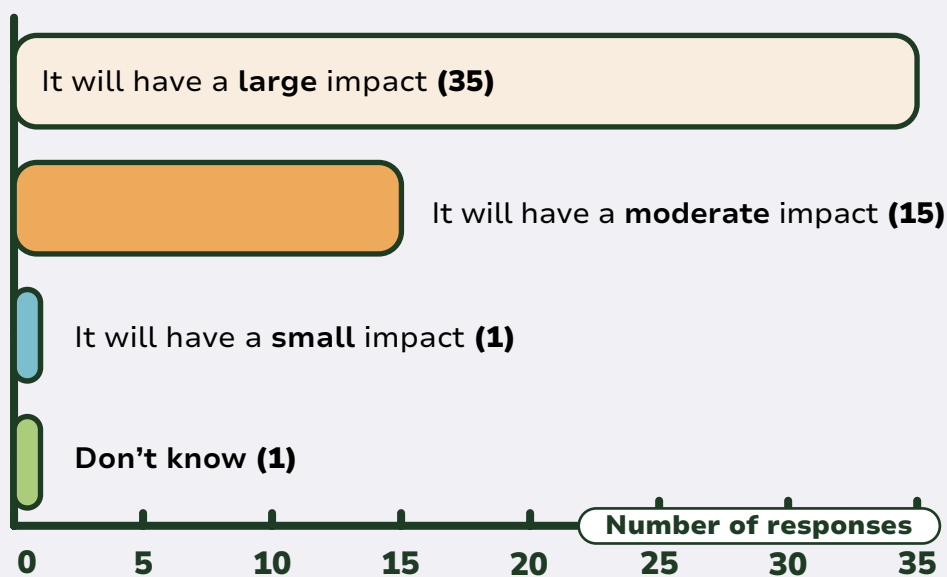


Figure 10: Responses to Youth Service Worker Survey, “How do you think access to meals will influence young people’s wellbeing?”

When asked to provide further comments on this respondents identified a range of ways in which they thought access to meals would benefit young people's wellbeing, including:

- ➔ **Better nutrition and physical health**, with access to reliable, nutritious meals leading to reduced hunger and healthier diets
 - ➔ *“Nutrition is so important for maintaining both positive physical and mental wellbeing [...] young people who don't receive nutritious meals otherwise will deeply benefit from this scheme.”*
- ➔ **Improved mood and mental wellbeing**, with access to meals helping to

reduce anxiety and stress while improving mood and confidence

➔ *“Feeling secure in knowing there will always be a meal throughout the day has a profound psychological impact on young people as they can be in a constant state of fight, flight and survival.”*

➔ *“To have the worry of where the food for the day is coming from removed from the young persons mind absolutely improves their well being”*

➔ **Increased concentration and readiness** to engage in other activities

➔ *“If young people have nutritious food, they will be able to concentrate and engage in the programme without being hungry”*

➔ **Reduced financial stress on families**, with positive consequences for the wellbeing of young people at home

➔ *“It will also alleviate financial strain on low income families and this can also promote better family relationships.”*

Respondents were then asked how they thought access to meals would influence young people’s engagement in summer activities. As shown in **Figure 11**, over half of respondents (54%) thought access to meals would have a large impact on young people’s engagement in summer activities, while 38% thought it would have a moderate impact and 4% thought it would have no real impact.

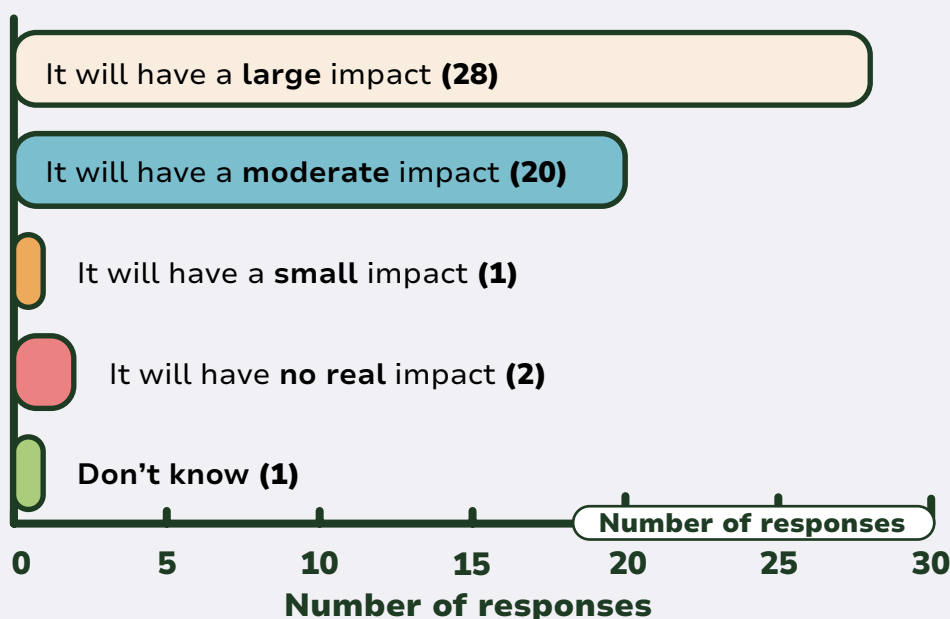


Figure 11: Responses to Youth Service Worker Survey, “How do you think access to meals will influence young people’s engagement in summer activities?”

Respondents provided a range of further comments in relation to ways in which they felt access to meals would influence young people's engagement in summer activities. The most common themes to emerge amongst responses were:

- ➔ Access to meals will **boost attendance and engagement** with summer activities, helping engage more young people and reduce disengagement as the summer progresses
 - ➔ *“Some young people who may not normally be engaged as much over the summer, will be more likely to come up for some food during the week. It will be a good way to keep the older teens engaged over the summer.”*
- ➔ Reducing hunger will give young people **more energy and focus** to take part in activities
 - ➔ *“Young people who have eaten tend to engage more with activities than those who are hungry. We do lots of sports and outdoor activities and the food is essential for their contribution and wellbeing.”*
- ➔ Meals provision will **provide a positive reason and incentive** for young people to come along to youth clubs during the summer months
 - ➔ *“It will be an incentive for parents to sign their young people in our summer programs. The young people are more likely to attend regularly.”*
 - ➔ *“Food always draws young people in, particularly when it's free! There is an excitement element when it arrives at the project, everyone looks forward to it.”*
- ➔ Access to meals will **reduce the financial barriers** faced by parents who otherwise would have had to pay for packed lunches for those attending activities
 - ➔ *“Parents will be more willing to send their child as they do not have to spend money on packed lunches.”*

Finally, 27% of respondents said they expected the meals to affect their ability to deliver other youth work activities, while 60% said they did not expect this to be the case. Amongst those who did expect it to affect their ability to deliver other youth work activities, most thought this effect would be positive, by helping to increase participation in youth work activities and by increasing the budget available to youth clubs for other project work (due to being able to redirect money they may otherwise have had to spend on providing food).

“This allows us to focus on creating more opportunities for our young people to engage in critical social programmes as we don't have to split the money for food and programme uses.”

A few respondents who answered *“Don’t know”*, meanwhile, felt that it was possible providing the meals would create timing/ staffing issues affecting their ability to deliver other activities, but that they hoped to avoid this being the case.

ETB Survey

Relatedly, respondents to the ETB survey were asked what they expect the impact of the meals to be on young people’s wellbeing or participation. Most respondents expected the pilot to have a positive impact both in terms of young people’s wellbeing and their participation in youth work activities. As explained by one ETB respondent:

“We would expect that if the targeting is accurate then the same young people who benefit from school meals during the year will similarly benefit during what would normally be a major gap in the summer months, and that this aspect should only increase levels of participation.”

Other potential impacts highlighted by respondents included increased nutritional awareness, and an increased sense of community and connection amongst the young people reached by the pilot.

6. Concerns and risk factors

Youth Worker Survey

Next, respondents to the Youth Service Worker Survey were asked whether they were aware of any concerns from young people or families in relation to the Summer Holiday Meals pilot programme. Six respondents (12%) said they were aware of concerns, while 40 (77%) said they were not. When asked to provide further comments, two respondents said they were aware of concerns around the fact that, as it is a pilot programme, the provision of meals may be a *“one-off”* and not continue into future years; while other concerns cited included the stigma associated with receiving *“free food”*, other members of families feeling overlooked by the focus on young people, and children outside the intended recipient age group for the pilot coming along in hope of accessing meals.

ETB Survey

In addition, respondents to the ETB survey were asked if there were any risks or unintended consequences of the pilot that they were concerned about. The most frequently raised concerns related to potential adverse impacts if the provision of meals is not continued in future years. Some respondents expressed concern that, in such an eventuality, youth work organisations would be placed in the difficult position of being faced with increased expectations from local young people and families because of the pilot, but without the necessary resources to meet these expectations.

“As always with these pilot programmes, the raised expectations that they bring puts added pressure on Funded Organisations to continually deliver and provide. If this programme is not extended or mainstreamed, there will still be an expectation locally but without adequate funding provision being made available.”

Other concerns mentioned included additional workloads being placed on staff, the potential labelling of young people participating in the pilot, and possible health and safety issues (notwithstanding youth organisations’ positive track record of adhering to relevant policies and practices).

7. Recommendations for improvement and future delivery

Youth Service Worker Survey

Finally, respondents to the Youth Service Worker Survey were asked what they would like to feed back to the designers and funders of the programme at this stage of the pilot. Here, many respondents provided positive feedback on the pilot to date, highlighting their gratitude for the scheme and the positive impact they feel it has had for the young people and families involved.

“This is a fantastic initiative and we are very grateful to be involved in the pilot of this programme. The families and young people we work with are really grateful for the food they get through this programme.”

Other key areas of feedback to emerge here included:

- ➔ Reflections that delivering the pilot did place **additional demands on staff**, with some respondents feeling that **additional funding** would help them to run the Programme more smoothly (for example, by enabling them to have one staff member focused solely on food-related tasks such as dishing up, cleaning and washing up);
- ➔ Requests for the **pilot to be made into a permanent programme**, both to enable earlier planning of how best to integrate meals into the provision of activities and to reduce concerns around potential negative impacts on young people should the provision of meals prove only to be temporary;
- ➔ A desire amongst some for **more flexibility** in certain areas, for example to supply families with ingredients to cook together and to be able to give families vouchers to cover periods when youth projects are not open;
- ➔ Feedback on the **importance of coordination and collaboration** in enabling the pilot to have a positive impact, including collaborations between different UBU projects to ensure the right young people are targeted;

- ➔ Requests for **earlier and increased engagement** with key stakeholders including youth workers with regards to the design and implementation of future programmes.

Asked if they had any further comments they wished to add at the end of the survey, most respondents provided reflections around the positive impacts they felt the pilot was having in practice at the time at which they completed the survey. In addition, one respondent highlighted the time implications for projects of some of the activities associated with the evaluation of the pilot (including surveys and food logs), which was not something they were aware of when they applied for the funding.

ETB Survey

Along similar lines, respondents to the ETB survey were asked to describe any recommendations they have regarding any potential future iterations of the Programme. Key themes to emerge amongst responses here included:

- ➔ Continued **flexibility of approach** from the Department with regards to the delivery of the programme, allowing room for styles of delivery to differ based on local capacity and need;
- ➔ Increased **consultation and dialogue** with ETBs and the youth work sector prior to roll out, ensuring local partners have sufficient time and capacity to take on the additional workload associated with programmes of this kind;
- ➔ Two respondents felt funding should be **provided directly to UBUs** or integrated into the overall UBU funding scheme to help them to incorporate the provision of meals into their summer programmes.
- ➔ Two respondents felt there was the potential for a **broader interagency approach** to be adopted in utilising the funding, potentially involving partners such as schools, third sector organisations, Family Resource Centres and ETBs.

Asked to provide any other comments in relation to the pilot, two ETB respondents said they welcomed the funding and its contribution to addressing child poverty and hunger. However, two respondents reiterated that they felt the initial roll-out of the pilot was flawed and rushed, causing difficulties for them as ETBs and for the participating organisations.

Young People's survey analysis

1. Respondent Profiles

A total of 28 responses were received to the Young People's Survey. Three ETB areas were represented amongst the survey respondents. The ETB area with the largest number of respondents were Kilkenny and Carlow (19 respondents), followed by Cavan and Monaghan (5 respondents), Louth and Meath (3 respondents). 1 respondent did not provide information on the summer youth club they attend.

When asked why they like attending the youth club, 71% of young people selected the activities, 61% seeing friends, 50% the food, 46% meeting new people. Two responses under 'other' were 'getting an excuse to go out' and 'trips' / 'making up food'.

2. What do you like about going to the youth club?

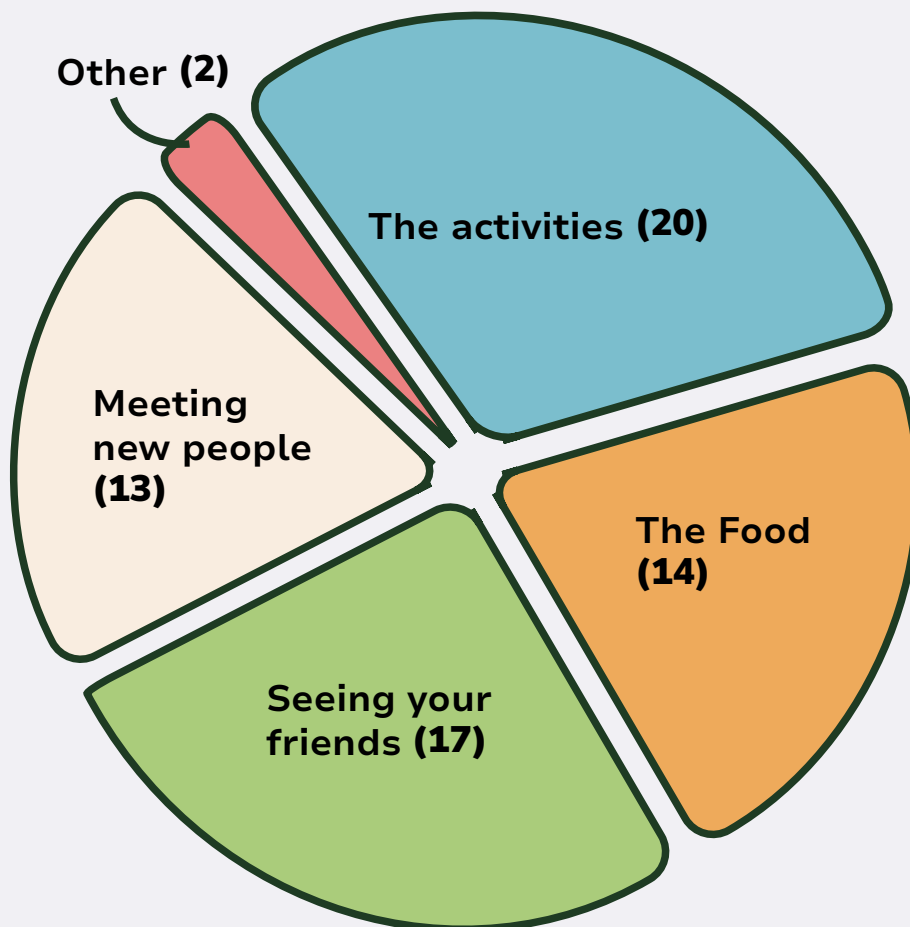


Figure 12: Responses to Young People's Survey, "What do you like about going to the youth club?"

3. What age category do you fit into?

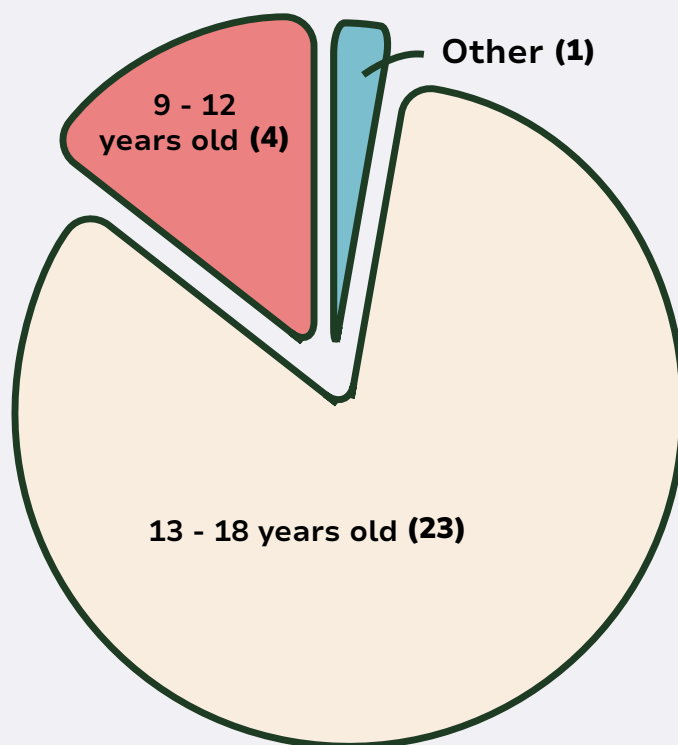


Figure 13: Responses to Young People's Survey, "What age category do you fit in?"

Most responses (+80%) were from the teenage/ adolescent age category 13 – 18 years old, which is within the National Teen Food Survey age range within the Republic of Ireland, although the overall age range of responses is from 9 – 20 years old.

A food frequency questionnaire (FFQ) was incorporated into the youth survey at the start of the pilot period to identify habitual dietary intake over the past three months in relation to the shelves of the Irish Food Pyramid.

This assessment tools aimed to gather information on how often specific foods were consumed to reveal patterns that 24 hours recalls or food diaries may miss. The amount of food is not assessed, only the frequency, and the average portions sizes used in the examples are based on the Irish Food Portion Sizes Database.¹⁰⁸

The analysis of the responses aims to highlight potential nutritional gaps to help youth services to tailor their menu plans and nutrition education in future iterations of the programme.

108 Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance (IUNA) (2013) "[The Irish Food Portion Sizes Database](#)"

Food Frequency Questionnaire Responses

4. Snacks and Fast Food (example portions: individual packet of crisps, chocolate bar with 8 pieces, or burger and chips from a fast food outlet/restaurant)

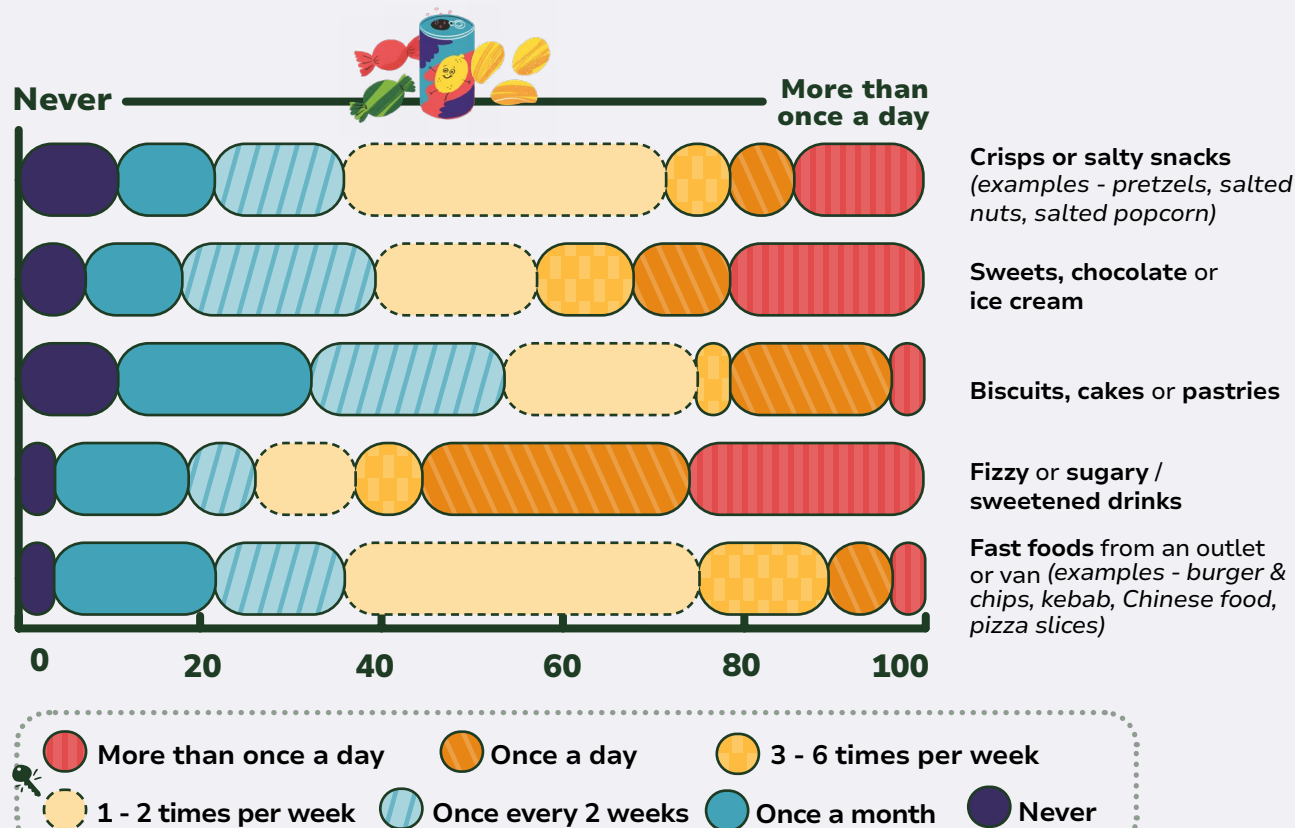


Figure 14: Responses to Young People's Survey, food frequency question: Snacks & Fast Foods

Crisps or salty snacks (examples - pretzels, salted nuts, salted popcorn) were in the main consumed '1 – 2 times per week' (36%). Other reported frequencies included 'more than once a day' (14%), once every two weeks' (14%), 'once a day' (7%), and '3 to 6 times per week' (7%). Meanwhile, 11% reported that they either 'never' consume these snacks or do so 'once a month' (11%). This suggests that most young people surveyed in this sample consume salty snacks in moderation, with most limiting intake to 1 – 2 times per week. However notably, over 20% consume salty snacks at least once a day.

Sweets, chocolate or ice-cream were most commonly consumed 'more than once a day' or 'once every 2 weeks' (21% each). Additionally, 18% reported having these snacks '1 – 2 times per week', while a small proportion consumed them 'once a day' (11%), 'once a month' (11%), '3 to 6 times per week' (11%) or 'never' (7%). However, these results highlight almost one-third of respondents (32%) consume these food items daily.

Biscuits, cakes or pastries were consumed 'once a month', 'once every 2 weeks' and '1 – 2 times per week' by 21% of respondents respectively, 'once a day' by

18% while 11% responded they 'never' have these types of snacks. An additional 4% consumed these foods 'more than once a day' or '3 – 6 times per week'.

Fizzy or sugary/sweetened drinks were consumed 'once a day' by 30% and 'more than once a day' by 26% of respondents, meaning a total of 56% reported drinking these beverages daily; while 15% of respondents said they consumed them 'once a month' and 4% reported 'never' drinking them. An additional 11% reported '1 – 2 times per week' and 7% '3 – 6 times per week' and 'once every 2 weeks' respectively.

Fast foods from an outlet or van (examples - burger & chips, kebab, Chinese food, pizza slices) were consumed in the main '1 – 2 times per week' (39%) followed by 'once a month' (18%), '3 – 6 times per week' (14%), 'once every two weeks' (14%), 'once a day' 7%, with 4% responding to the two extremes 'more than once a day' and 'never'

Overall, **fizzy or sugary/ sweetened drinks** were the snack items being consumed either 'once a day' (30%) or 'more than once a day' (26%) equating to 56% drinking sugary beverages daily. **Sweets, chocolate and ice-cream** showed more varied patterns of consumption split between 'more than once a day' (21%) or 'once a day' (11%) and occasional consumption once every two weeks (21%). However, these results show that almost one-third (32%) were consuming these food items daily.

Salty snacks (such as crisps and pretzels) were also regularly consumed, with the most common frequency being '1- 2 times per week' (36%), although 20% consumed them at least once per day, suggesting a notable minority with a high intake. **Biscuits, cakes and pastries** were generally consumed less frequently, with 18% consuming them daily and only 4% reporting more than once a day with 11% stating they never eat them. Fast foods were more likely to be consumed weekly rather than daily with the majority of respondents (39%) includes these foods in their diet once or twice a week.

Snacks **other** than fruit, vegetables and yoghurt are classified as top shelf items on the 'health for life' pyramid and not required for good health¹⁰⁹. Young people in the Healthy Ireland Survey 2024 (2021 – 2024), aged between 15 – 24 years, were reported to be the highest consumers of 'unhealthy snacks' having 'one snack per day' (30%) and those aged 15 – 24 years were the most likely to report eating 'two or more snacks per day' (42%). In addition, this Healthy Ireland survey also highlighted daily consumption of sugar sweetened drinks had increased amongst the same age group, 15 – 24 years to 16%, with an increase in consumption by 4% since 2019 (12%).¹¹⁰

This suggests a somewhat similarly high level of consumption of snacks and fast foods with higher intakes of fizzy/ sugar sweetened drinks amongst the young

109 Healthy Ireland (2016), ['Healthy Food for Life'](#)

110 Healthy Ireland (2024), ['Healthy Ireland Survey 2024'](#)

people (aged 9 – 20 years) surveyed (28 respondents) during the summer meals pilot in comparison with the average for young people across Ireland (15 – 24 years) who surveyed (7,398 people, aged 15 and older living in Ireland), however these results must be taken in the context of differing age ranges, time period, number of respondents and data collection method (an online survey versus a telephone interview).

5. Cereals & Breads, Potatoes, Pasta & Rice (example portions: one pitta pocket, one cup of cereal, one cup of cooked pasta, rice or noodles, two medium potatoes)

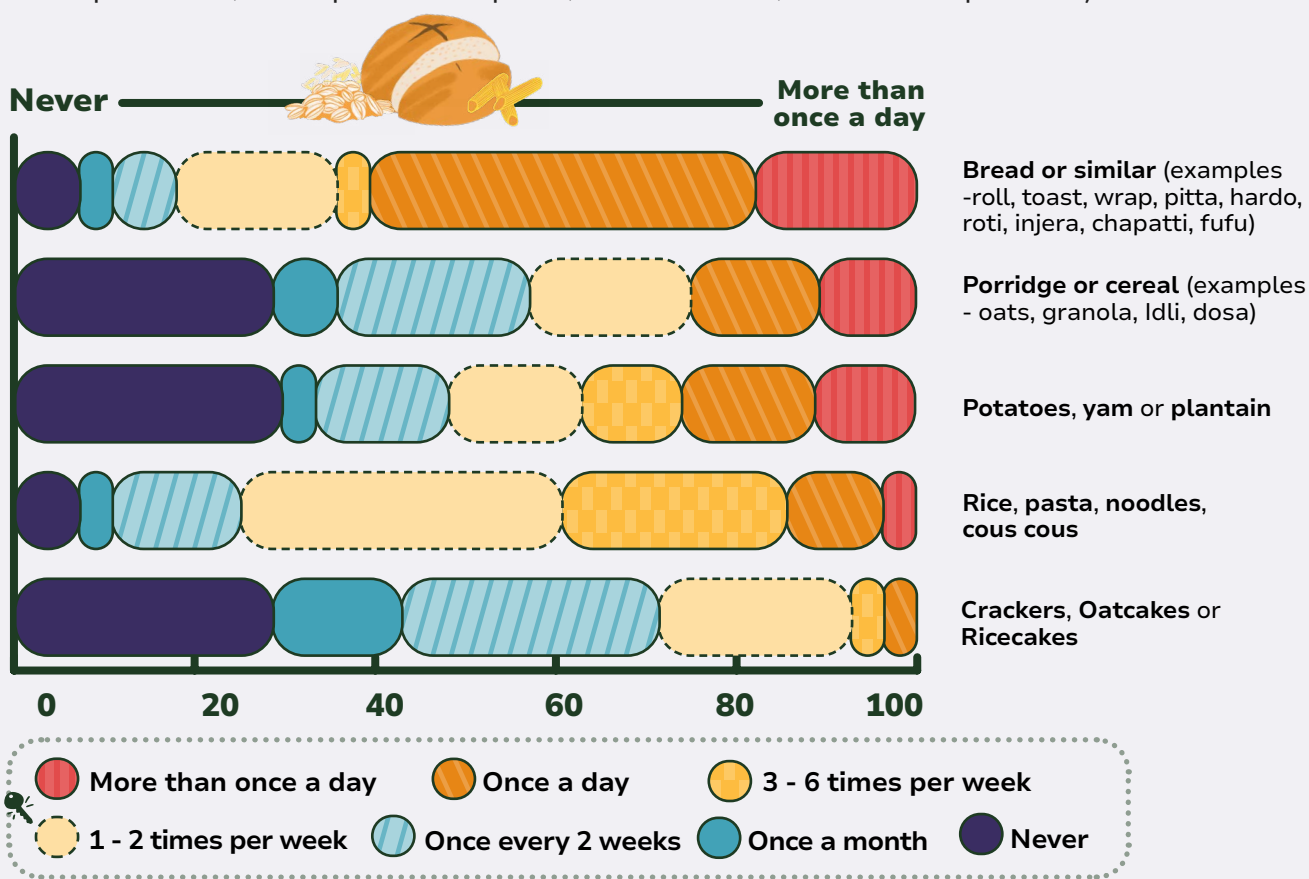


Figure 15: Responses to Young People’s Survey, food frequency question: Cereals & Breads, Potatoes, Pasta & Rice

Bread or similar (examples -roll, toast, wrap, pitta, hardoo, roti, injera, chapatti, fufu) were consumed in the main ‘once a day’ (43%), followed by ‘1 – 2 times per week’ (18%) and ‘more than once a day’ (18%). At the other end of the scale, 7% responded ‘never’ and 4% ‘once a month’. In comparison to other carbohydrates sources, bread or similar was the most popular option, being consumed by 61% of respondents at least once a day. For this survey, bread type e.g., wholemeal was not investigated.

Porridge or cereal (examples - oats, granola, Idli, dosa) were less popular with the majority of respondents 29% reporting ‘never’ having this type of food,

followed by 21% 'once every 2 weeks', 18% '1 - 2 times per week', and 14% 'once a day'. 11% of respondents reporting having porridge or cereal 'more than once a day' and 7% 'once a month'.

The Irish National Teen's Food Survey II (2021) reported that breakfast cereals were consumed by 73% of teenagers with 67% consuming 'ready to eat' breakfast cereals and 17% 'hot oat cereals' including porridge without commenting on frequency.¹¹¹

The proportion of young people in this survey reporting that they 'never' eat porridge or cereal may reflect both the fact that these are typical breakfast foods and the finding from the National Youth Council of Ireland that 22% (around 1 in 5) young people in Ireland skip meals, often due to cost.¹¹² Young people skipping breakfast was also reported during site visits or attending clubs for a hot breakfast rather than cereals.

Potatoes, yam or plantain were again less popular foods with 30% responding they 'never' consume these items, followed by 15% 'once every 2 weeks', 15% '1 - 2 times per week' and 15% 'once a day'. The highest percentage of respondents reporting 'never' to having potatoes, yam or plantain may be reflective of the small sample size.

Potatoes were reported by the National Teen's Food Survey II (2021) to be staple foods for Irish teenagers (aged 13 - 18 years) in quantities that are of nutritional value as a source of energy and fibre, with an average intake of 84g per day, either in the form of chips, fried or roast potatoes, boiled, mashed or baked potatoes. However, the latest teens survey reports a lower daily consumption of potatoes and potato products than the previous National Teen's Food Survey I (2005-06) (136g per day).¹¹³

Rice, pasta, noodles, cous cous were consumed in the main '1 - 2 times per week' by 36% of respondents, followed by 25% '3 - 6 times per week', and 14% 'once every two weeks'. Meanwhile, 11% consumed these foods 'once a day', 4% 'more than once a day', 4% 'once a month' and 7% 'never'. Rice and other carbohydrate foods are described as staple foods for Irish teenagers with an average consumption of 128g per day with an increase in intake of pasta, rice and savoury foods since 2005-06.¹¹⁴

Crackers, oatcakes or ricecakes were less frequently consumed items with the majority either consuming these items 'once every 2 weeks' (29%) or 'never' (29%), only 4% of respondents reporting having crackers or savoury snacks 'once a day'. Others consumed these items '1 - 2 times per week' (20%), 'once a month' (14%), '3 - 6 times per week' (4%).

Among the carbohydrate-rich foods assessed, **bread and similar items** (e.g., rolls, wraps, toast) emerged as the most frequently consumed, with 61% of respondents

111 Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance (IUNA) (2021), ['National Teens Food Survey II'](#)

112 National Youth Council Ireland (2024), ['State of our young nation. a report into the lives of irish 18 - 29 year olds'](#)

113 Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance (IUNA) (2021), ['National Teens Food Survey II'](#)

114 lbid

reporting intake at least once per day. In contrast, other carbohydrate sources showed more varied and often lower levels of consumption.

Porridge or cereal was less popular, with **29%** stating they never consume these items — possibly reflecting changing breakfast habits or barriers such as meal-skipping due to cost, as supported by external findings from the National Youth Council of Ireland. This contrasts with the Irish National Teen’s Food Survey II (2021), which found that 73% of teenagers consumed breakfast cereals, though frequency was not specified.

Potatoes, yams, and plantains were also less commonly consumed in this survey, with 30% reporting they never eat them, despite national data identifying potatoes as a traditional staple food among Irish teenagers. The reduced intake observed may relate to sample size or changing food preferences.

Rice, pasta, noodles, and couscous were consumed more moderately, with 36% eating them ‘1–2 times per week’ and 25% ‘3–6 times per week’, possibly reflecting a shift toward more diverse carbohydrate sources. **Crackers, oatcakes, and rice cakes** were the least frequently consumed items, with 58% of respondents eating them only occasionally (once every two weeks or less), and just 4% consuming them daily, perhaps favouring ‘sweeter’ snacks as found in the previous section.

Overall, the findings suggest that while **bread and similar foods remain a daily staple**, other carbohydrate sources particularly traditional options like potatoes and breakfast cereals are less consistently consumed, possibly due to changing eating habits, convenience preferences, or economic barriers.



6. Milk, Yoghurt & Cheese (example portions: one glass of milk, one carton of yoghurt, matchbox size piece of cheese)

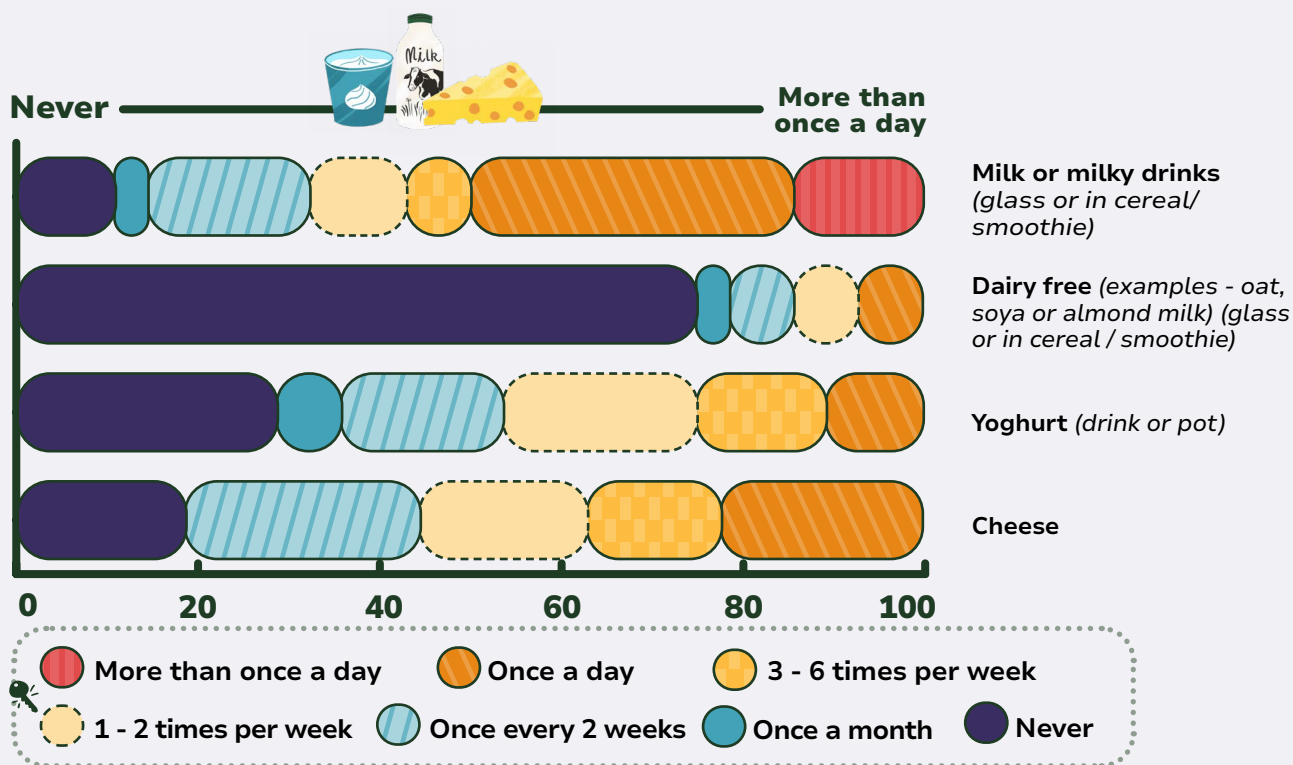


Figure 16: Responses to Young People's Survey, food frequency question: Milk, Yoghurt & Cheese

Milk or milky drinks (glass or in cereal/ smoothie) were consumed in the main 'once a day' by 36%, followed by 'once every two weeks' (18%) and 'more than once a day' (14%). 11% of respondents reported 'never' having these dairy items. Others chose '1 - 2 times per week' (11%), '3 - 6 times per week' (7%) and 'once a month' (4%).

This aligns with the average consumption of milk being 'one glass per day' in the National Teens Food Survey II (2021) consumed by 84% of teenagers, mainly as a drink or with cereal, with whole milk being favoured over reduced fat milk, although this survey has seen a reduced intake of milk since its earlier cohorts in 2005-06.¹¹⁵ Milk is reported by the National Dairy Council of Ireland as an important source of proteins, carbohydrates and fats alongside vitamins and minerals such as calcium, potassium, iodine and B vitamins for bone and teeth development, muscle function and other health benefits during a period of rapid physical growth.¹¹⁶

Dairy Free alternatives to milk (examples - oat, soya or almond milk) (glass or in cereal/ smoothie) were 'never' consumed by 75% of respondents with 7%

115 Ibid

116 National Dairy Council (2022), ['Real Talk About Nutrients in Milk & Dairy'](#)

consuming these products 'once every two weeks', '1 - 2 times per week' (7%) and 'once a day' (7%). With no respondents for 'more than once a day'. The low consumption of non-dairy items aligns with the National Teens Food Survey II which found only 3% of milk consumed was non-dairy, such as nut milks or soya-based products.¹¹⁷

Yoghurts (drink or pot) were 'never' consumed by 29% of respondents, followed by '1 - 2 times per week' by 21%, 'once every two weeks' by 18%, '3 - 6 times per week' by 14% and 'once a day' by 11% with no responses to 'more than once a day'. The average daily consumption of yoghurt in the National Teens Food Survey II (2021) was 18g per day by 30% of teenagers which equates to a heaped tablespoon while a full pot or drink would be around 100 - 125g (or ml).¹¹⁸ Yoghurts are a source of protein, calcium, iodine and b vitamins and were often provided by youth services during the pilot as a snack or dessert option alongside fruit and granola.

Cheese was consumed in the main 'once every two weeks' by 26% of respondents, '1 - 2 times per week' by 19%, '3 - 6 times per week' by 15% and 'once a day' by 22% while 19% of respondents 'never' have cheese. According to the National Teens Food Survey II (2021), 57% of teenagers consumed cheese with an average intake per day of 11g.¹¹⁹

Overall, collating the individual responses 11% of respondents are likely to consume a dairy portion three times a day while 39% would consume two portions a day and the remaining 50% of respondents were once a day or less. The Healthy food for Life, Food Pyramid recommends that young people aged 9 - 18 years consume five portions of dairy per day.¹²⁰ The Irish Osteoporosis Society also emphasise that childhood and teenagers' years, particular the years before puberty (8 - 12 years) are critical for bone development, with peak bone strength typically reached in their early twenties.¹²¹ Dairy food, such as milk, cheese and yoghurts, provides essential calcium, protein and energy, especially when combined with a balanced diet and weight bearing strength exercises.¹²² Ensuring young people have daily access to dairy products or alternative calcium-rich foods, such as green leafy vegetables, would be beneficial to support bone density and reduce the risk of osteoporosis and fragility fractures in later life.

117 Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance (IUNA) (2021), '[National Teens Food Survey II](#)'

118 lbid

119 lbid

120 Healthy Ireland (2016), '[Healthy Food for Life](#)'

121 Irish Osteoporosis Society (no date). '[Prevention of Bone Loss in Children and Teenagers](#)'

122 lbid

7. Meat, Poultry, Fish, Eggs, Beans & Nuts (example portions: palm sized chicken breast, two eggs or a small handful of nuts)

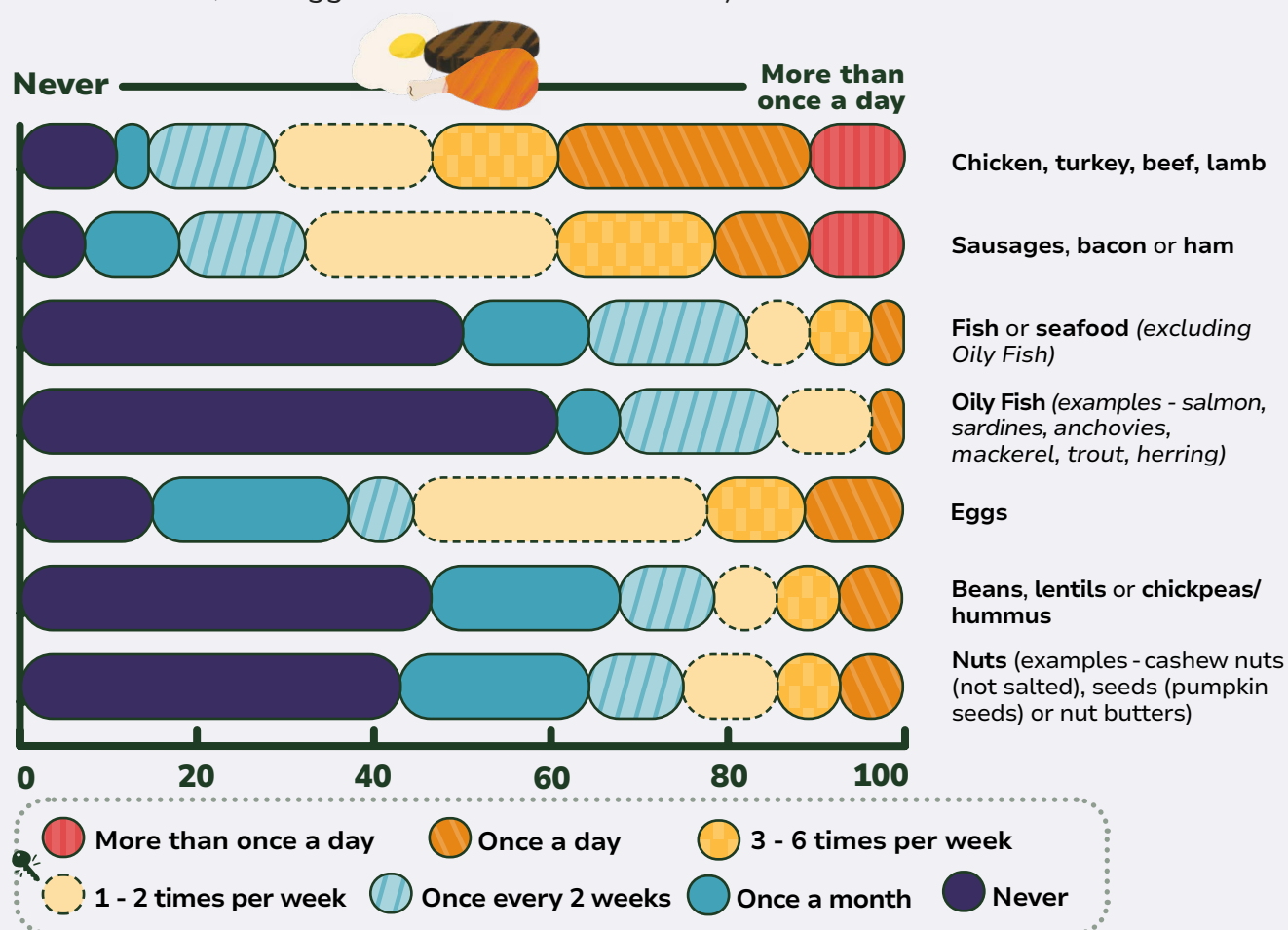


Figure 17: Responses to Young People’s Survey, food frequency question: Meat, Poultry, Fish, Eggs, Beans & Nuts

Chicken, turkey, beef, lamb were consumed in the main ‘once a day’ by 29% of respondents, followed by ‘1 - 2 times per week’ (18%), ‘once every 2 weeks’ (14%), ‘3 – 6 times per week’ (14%), ‘More than once a day’ (11%) and ‘never’ (11%). A small minority of 4% consumed these protein sources only ‘once a month’.

The National Teens Food Survey II (2021) noted that all the teenagers in their cohort ate meat, with chicken being the most popular choice followed by beef, with a mean daily intake of 166g meat (equivalent to one large chicken breast).¹²³ The food pyramid recommends a portion size of 50 – 75g cooked lean beef, lamb, port, mince or poultry (without skin).¹²⁴

Sausages, bacon or ham were consumed in the main ‘1 - 2 times per week’ by 29% of respondents, followed by 18% eating them ‘3 - 6 times per week’. Smaller

123 Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance (IUNA) (2021), ‘[National Teens Food Survey II](#)’

124 Healthy Ireland (2016), ‘[Healthy Food for Life](#)’

proportions reported consumptions 'once every 2 weeks' 14%, 'more than once a day' 11%, 'once a day' 11% and 'once a month' 11%, while 7% stated they 'never' consume these meat.

These items are classified as processed meats, which the Healthy Ireland Food Pyramid recommends limiting.¹²⁵ In line with this recommendation, the Irish school meal standards advise that processed meats such as bacon, ham and sausages should be served no more than once a week.¹²⁶

Fish or Seafood (excluding Oily Fish) were 'never' consumed by 50% of respondents. Among those who did eat fish, 18% reported having it 'once every 2 weeks', 14% 'once a month', 7% '1 - 2 times per week', 7% '3 - 6 times per week' and 4% consumed fish 'once a day'.

The Health Service Executive (HSE) recommend fish be consumed up to twice a week, one of which should be oily fish e.g., salmon or mackerel as a source of protein and iron.¹²⁷ Therefore, most young people completing the survey were unlikely to be meeting this recommendation, providing scope for the summer meals programme and future iterations to provide fish as a menu option and look at different ways to encourage consumption, such as incorporating fish into favoured dishes or providing education on the benefits of fish in the diet.

Oily Fish (examples – salmon, sardines, anchovies, mackerel, trout, herring) Over 60% of respondents (61%) reported 'never' having oily fish as per the examples listed. Those who did include oily fish in their diet did so 'once every 2 weeks' (18%), '1 - 2 times per week' (11%), 'once a month' (7%) and 'once a day' (4%). The recommendation is for oily fish up to twice per week.¹²⁸ Therefore, there is a small % of respondents who are meeting this requirement (11%) while there is potentially one respondent who is overconsuming by having oily fish every day.

Eggs were consumed by over one-third of respondents, with 33% eating them '1 - 2 times per week'. Other frequencies included 'once a month' (22%), 'never' (15%), '3 - 6 times per week' (11%), 'once a day' (11%) and 'once every 2 weeks' (7%).

By comparison the National Teens Food Survey II (2021) found that 36% of teenagers consume eggs daily, underlining their nutritional value as a source of Vitamin D, B vitamins, protein, both saturated and unsaturated fats.¹²⁹ In the young people survey, only 11% of respondents reported consuming eggs 'once per day' and 15% consumed them '3 - 6 times per week'.

125 lbid

126 Healthy Ireland (2016), '[Nutrition Standards for School Meals](#)'

127 Health Service Executive (HSE) (2023), '[How to eat well](#)'

128 lbid and Healthy Ireland (2016), '[Healthy Food for Life](#)'

129 Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance (IUNA) (2021), '[National Teens Food Survey II](#)'

While there is no official daily recommend egg intake, eggs can contribute to daily servings of protein foods recommended in healthy eating guidance. This suggest that eggs could be considered for holiday food provision or future meal planning, with opportunities to promote greater consumptions through varied menu options.

Beans, lentils or chickpeas/hummus were 'never' consumed by 46% of respondents with a further 21% eating them 'once a month' 21%. Only a small proportion reported more regular consumption: 11% 'once every 2 weeks', and 7% each for '1 - 2 times per week', '3 - 6 times per week' and 'once a day'. According to school meal nutrition standards, three quarters of a cup (~120g) of pulses can serve as a valuable protein source and meat-free alternative for young people following a vegetarian or vegan diet or those looking for variety in their meal choices.¹³⁰

Nuts (examples – cashew nuts (not salted), seeds (pumpkin seeds) or nut butters) were similarly under-consumed with 43% of respondents saying they 'never' eat them and only 7% reported daily intake. Those that did consume nuts, seeds and nut butters did so 'once a month' (21%), 'once every 2 weeks' (11%), '1 - 2 times per week' (11%), '3 – 6 times per week' (7%), and 'once a day' (7%).

This aligns with the National Teens Food Survey II (2021), which found just 13% of teenagers consumed nuts and seeds, with an average intake of 2g per day.¹³¹ This is far below the Health Service Executive (HSE) recommended 40g serving.¹³² While nuts and seeds are considered a nutrient dense snack or addition to meals, their inclusion in menu plans must be considered carefully for those with allergies or intolerances.¹³³

Meat, especially chicken and turkey, are the most commonly consumed protein, with many eating it daily or weekly. Processed meats are also popular but often exceed recommended limits. Fish, particularly oily fish, is under-consumed, with half of respondents never eating fish, falling short of health guidelines and eggs are eaten moderately but less than national averages. Plant-based proteins like beans, lentils, and nuts are the least consumed, with nearly half 'never' eating them. These findings highlight opportunities to broaden menu options and align with national dietary guidelines to support the inclusion of a variety of protein sources in the diet of young people attending holiday clubs and activities.

130 Healthy Ireland (2016), '[Nutrition Standards for School Meals](#)'

131 Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance (IUNA) (2021), '[National Teens Food Survey II](#)'

132 Health Service Executive (HSE) (2023), '[How to eat well](#)'

133 Healthy Ireland (2016), '[Nutrition Standards for School Meals](#)'

8. Vegetables, Salad & Fruit (example portions: one large (apple) or two small pieces of fruit (plums), handful of grapes or strawberries, small bowl of salad, bowl of vegetable soup, small glass of fresh juice or homemade smoothie)

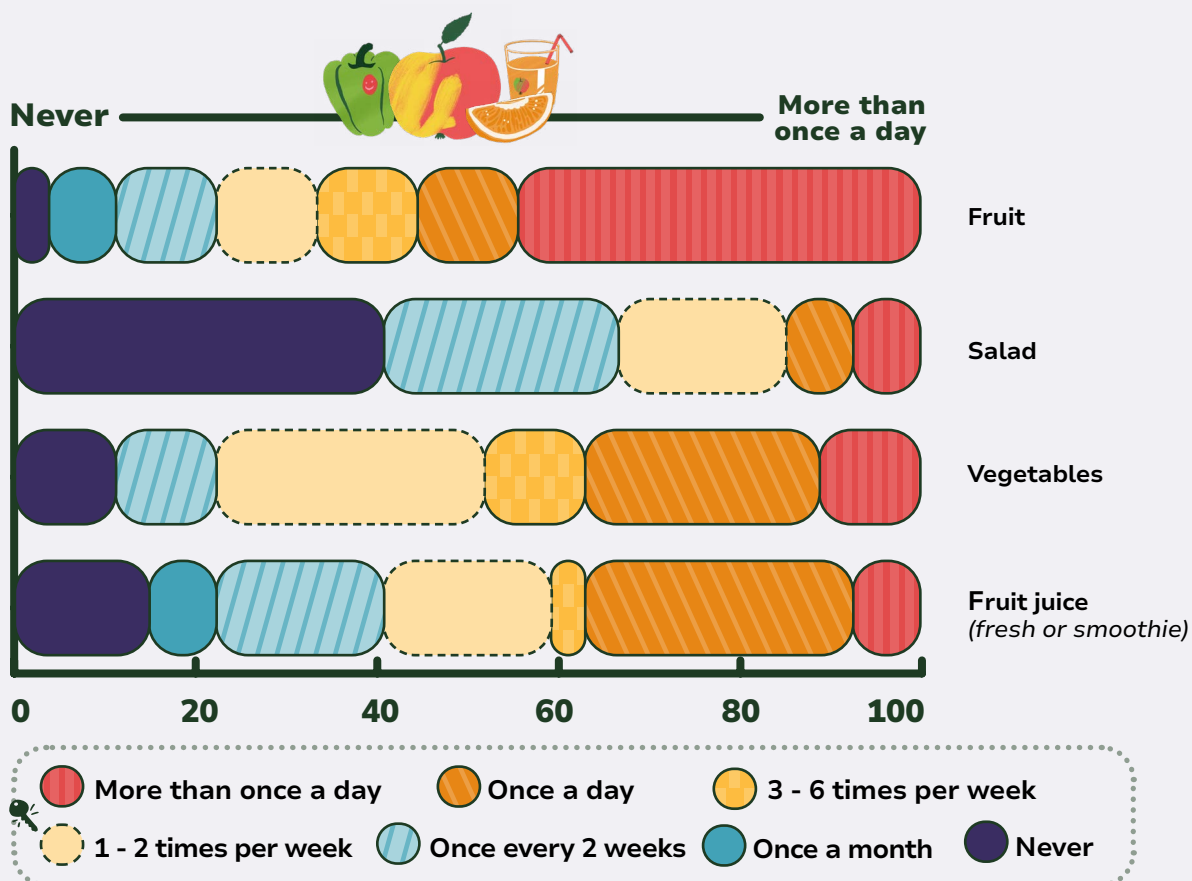


Figure 18: Responses to Young People’s Survey, food frequency question: Vegetables, Salad & Fruit

Fruit was the most popular item from the bottom shelf of the food pyramid, with 44% of respondents eating fruit as described ‘more than once a day’ and a further 11% consuming it ‘once a day’, meaning 55% had at least one daily serving. Other reported frequencies included 11% ‘3 - 6 times per week’, 11% ‘1 - 2 time per week’, 11% ‘once every two weeks’, 7% ‘once a month’ and 4% ‘never’. Compared to the national average reported in the National Teens Food Survey II (2021), which found 93% of teenagers consumed fruit daily, with an average intake of 67g,¹³⁴ the young people surveyed in the summer meals programmes were potentially consuming less fruit than their peers. This result highlights a potential opportunity for youth clubs to enhance their food provision by offering fruit regularly, encouraging consumption in innovative ways and incorporating education on its nutritional value into their programmes.

Salad was not included in the diet of 41% respondents, indicating it was ‘never’ consumed. A further 26% reported eating salad ‘once every 2 weeks’, while 19%

134 Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance (IUNA) (2021), ‘[National Teens Food Survey II](#)’

consumed it '1 - 2 times per week'. Only a small proportion reported a more regular intake, with 7% consuming salad 'once a day' and another 7% 'more than once a day'. A bowl of salad, typically comprising ingredients such as lettuce, tomato and cucumber can contribute meaningfully to the recommended 5 – 7 servings of fruit and vegetables a day.¹³⁵ While recent national data specific to salad intake among Irish teenagers is limited, earlier research by Dr Karen Trew (2005) for *Safefood* surveyed 5000 young people aged 12 – 17 years across Ireland. This research found that 41% of respondents reported 'hardly ever' or 'never' ate raw vegetables or salad.¹³⁶ This finding appears consistent with the present sample and highlights a continued gap in salad and raw vegetable consumptions among young people. Youth clubs could consider incorporating fresh salad into menus more frequently alongside education on their nutritional value and how to prepare or enjoy them in different ways e.g., adding to sandwiches, offer a salad bar for young people to build their own, select colourful ingredients to be visually appealing, add as individual side dishes for those with sensory issues, combine with grains, beans and roasted veg or incorporate into smoothies.

Vegetables were consumed in the main '1 - 2 times per week' by 30% of respondents. A further, 26% reported eating them 'once a day', while 11% each consumed vegetables 'more than once a day', '3 - 6 times per week', 'once every 2 weeks'. Another 11% 'never' eat vegetables. Overall, 37% of young people in the sample reported eating vegetables at least once a day.

By comparison, the National Teens Food Survey II (2021) found that 84% of teenagers consumed vegetables on their own daily, with an average intake of 47g. When including vegetables found within composite dishes (e.g., within a pie or stew) 94% of teenagers were found to consume vegetables.¹³⁷ Given that a higher percentage of teenagers consumed vegetables as part of a composite dish, adding vegetables into familiar dishes, for example, pasta in a tomato and herb sauce, may be an effective strategy to increase the uptake of vegetable within this age group.

Fruit Juice (fresh or smoothie) was consumed in the main 'once a day' by 30% of respondents. Other reported frequencies included '1 - 2 times per week' (19%), 'once every two weeks' (19%), 'never' (15%), 'more than once a day' (7%), 'once a month' (7%) and '3 - 6 times per week' (4%). A 150ml glass or carton of unsweetened fruit juice, either fresh or from concentrate, contributes to the recommended 5 – 7 daily servings of fruit, vegetables or salad according to healthy eating guidelines.¹³⁸

Overall, based on combined responses within this section, approximately 7% of respondents are likely to meet the recommended 7 daily servings of fruit, vegetables

135 Health Service Executive (HSE) (2023), '[How to eat well](#)'

136 Irish Times (2025), '[Study shows unhealthy food choices by young](#)'

137 Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance (IUNA) (2021), '[National Teens Food Survey II](#)'

138 Healthy Ireland (2016), '[Healthy Food for Life](#)'

or salad for post-primary school children.¹³⁹ The majority reported lower intakes with 32% likely to have 1 - serving, 29% - 2 servings, 18% - 3 servings and 21% - 4 servings or more. This indicates, most respondents are not meeting the daily recommended intake of foods that are key sources of micronutrients (vitamins and minerals), phytochemicals and antioxidants and dietary fibre.¹⁴⁰

9. Fats, Spreads & Oils (example portions: one portion pack of butter for two slices of bread or one level tablespoon of mayonnaise)

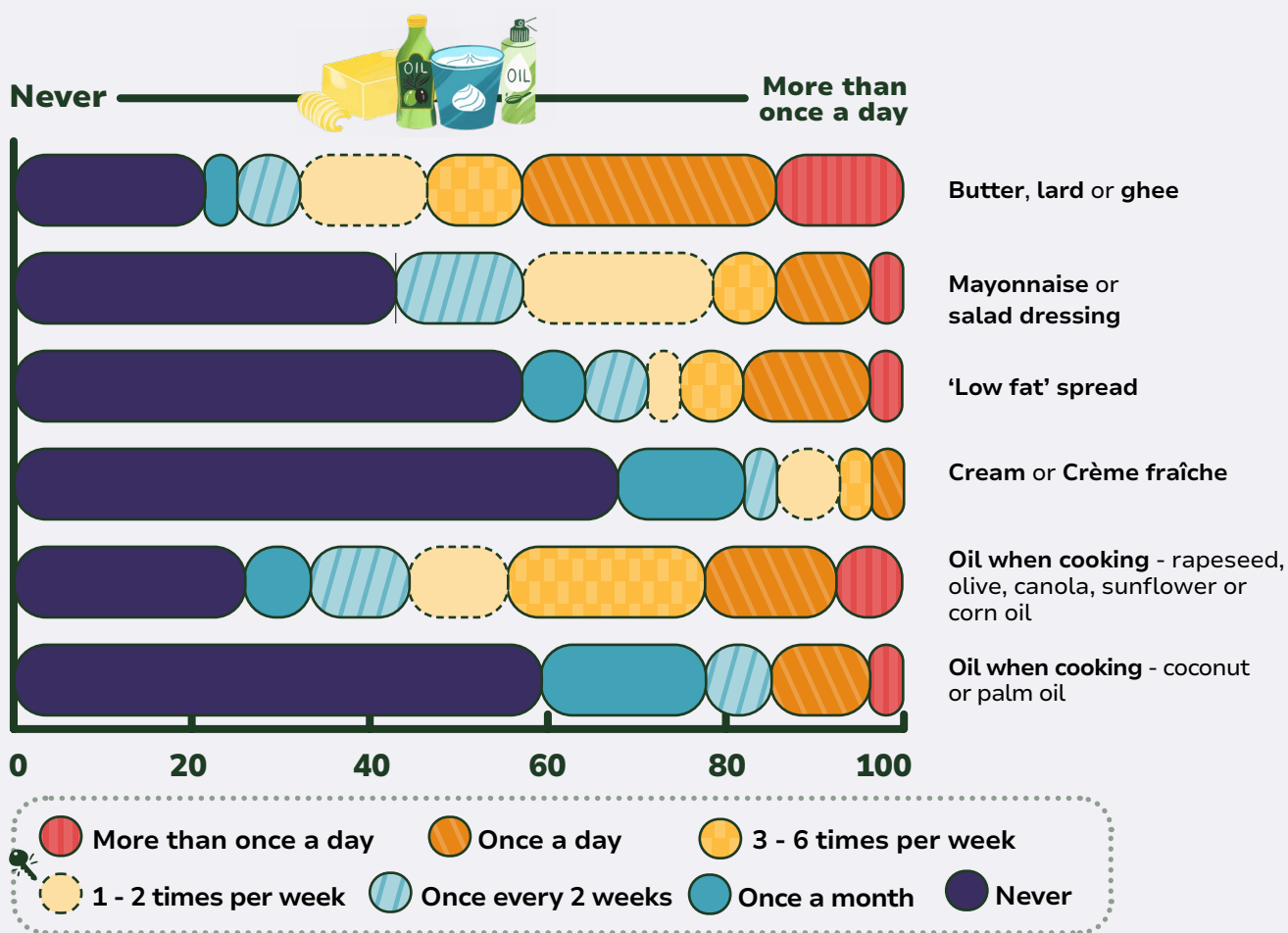


Figure 19: Responses to Young People’s Survey, food frequency question: Fats, Spreads & Oils

Butter, lard or ghee were consumed in the main ‘once a day’ by 29% of respondents. Others reported frequencies included ‘never’ (21%), ‘more than once a day’ (14%), ‘1 - 2 times per week’ (14%), ‘3 - 6 times per week’ (11%), ‘once every 2 weeks’ (7%) and ‘once a month’ (4%).

Mayonnaise or salad dressing were ‘never’ consumed by 43% of respondents. Among those who did include them in their diet 21% reported consumption ‘1 -

139 Healthy Ireland (2016), ‘[Nutrition Standards for School Meals](#)’

140 Irish Food Board (2025) ‘[Life is Better with Fruit & Vegetables - Health](#)’

2 times per week', 14% 'once every 2 weeks', 11% 'once a day', '3 – 6 times per week' 7%, 'more than once a day' 4%.

'Low fat' spreads were 'never' consumed by 57% of respondents. Among those who did use them, 14% reported consumption 'once a day', 7% 'once a month', 7% 'once every 2 weeks', 7%, '3 - 6 times per week', 4% '1 - 2 times per week' and 4% 'more than once a day'.

Cream or Crème fraîche were 'never' consumed by 68% of respondents, while 14% included these items 'once a month', 7% '1 - 2 times per week', 4% 'once every 2 weeks', 4% '3 - 6 times per week', 4% 'once a day'. No respondent reported consuming these items 'more than once a day'.

Fats, spreads and oils are recommended in small amounts for spreading on bread (sandwich or toast) or added to dishes within the school meals guidance.¹⁴¹ In the main, Creme (or Crème fraîche), 'low fat' spreads and mayonnaise/salad dressings were 'never' consumed by most respondents while butter (lard or ghee) was consumed 'once a day' by most respondents. Portions sizes were not reviewed, and most fats and oils contain differing amounts of saturated and unsaturated fats limiting a detailed analysis. However, with national surveys both in Ireland and across the UK highlighting excess intake of saturated fat, exceeding guidance as a % of energy, there is an opportunity for education around dietary fats amongst young people and their families and suggestions on lower fat options and alternative flavourings such as herbs, spices or yoghurt-based dressings.

Oil when cooking - rapeseed, olive, canola, sunflower or corn oil (high in unsaturated fats) were used '3 - 6 time per week' by 22% of respondents, 'once a day' by 15%, '1 - 2 times per week' by 11%, 'once every 2 weeks' by 11%, 'once a month' by 7%, 'more than once a day' by 7% and the highest percentage, 26% 'never' used these oil products when cooking.

Oil when cooking - coconut or palm oil (high in saturated fat) were used 'once a month' by 19% of respondents, 'once a day' by 11%, 'once every 2 weeks' by 7%, 'more than once a day' by 4%. The majority, 60% reported 'never' using these oils when cooking.

The Health Service Executive (HSE) guide for 'Eating well' in Ireland highlights cooking oils as a source of saturated and unsaturated fats, recommending portion sizes of (7g / portion pack) of reduced or 'low' fat spread and (5g / 1 teaspoon) of rapeseed, olive, canola, sunflower or corn.¹⁴² Overall, the unsaturated oil options were most popular with respondents in the sample, however responses may be impacted by the respondent's knowledge of the oil used within the household or their involvement in cooking.

141 lbid

142 Health Service Executive (HSE) (2023), '[How to eat well](#)'

10. Would you like to say more about what you like to eat and how often you have these foods?

When given the opportunity to highlight anything missed from the food frequency questionnaire, two additional comments were provided.

'I am mostly into pasta and pizza, Italian food'

'I love burgers and rashers'

These comments reflect individual preferences that influence the food choices young people make, driven by a variety of motivating factors. Research on the food choice motivations of Irish teenagers, using data from the National Teens Food Survey II (2021) identified key influences such as health considerations, price, availability, ease of preparation and sensory appeal (e.g., taste, texture and smell). Additional factors include weight management, mood and ethical concerns.^{143 36}

By understanding these motivations and actively involving young people in decisions around food provision within the youth setting, there are valuable opportunities for health promotion. This approach may support the alignment of the foods on offer with dietary recommendations for specific age groups, enabling the provision to be both appealing and nutritionally appropriate.

11 - 12. Specific Diets (for example, vegetarian, vegan, halal, kosher)

When asked if they followed a specific diet, 86% said 'no', 3% said 'yes' and 11% said 'don't know'. The respondent who said yes to following a specific diet declined to provide more details under question 12.

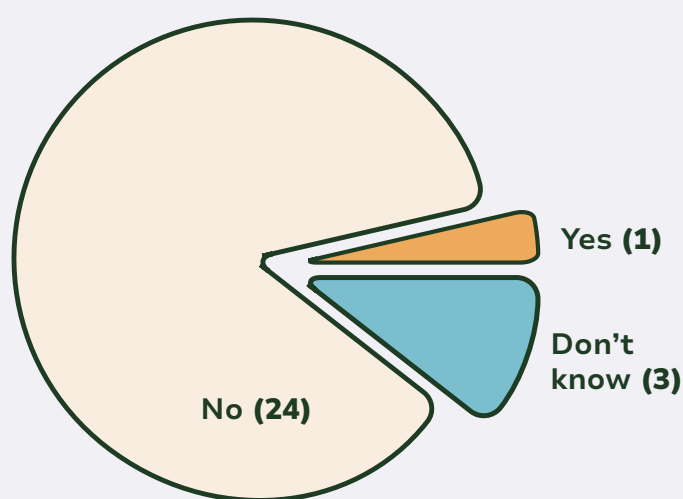


Figure 20: Responses to Young People's Survey, "Do you follow a specific diet (for example vegetarian, vegan, halal, kosher)?"

143 Daly et al., 2023. ['Determining the food choice motivations of Irish teens and their association with dietary intakes, using the Food Choice Questionnaire'](#)

13. Gender

The split across gender was 57% male and 39%, with 1 respondent declining to answer.

14. - 15. Activity and Exercise

Among respondents, 46% reported being active for 'more than 60 minutes a day' while 7% were active for around '60 minutes per day'. An additional 21% were active for '30 minutes a day', 18% reported being 'not active' (inactive) and 4% were unsure, responding 'don't know'. Overall, over half (53% of respondents) were active for at least 60 minutes per day.

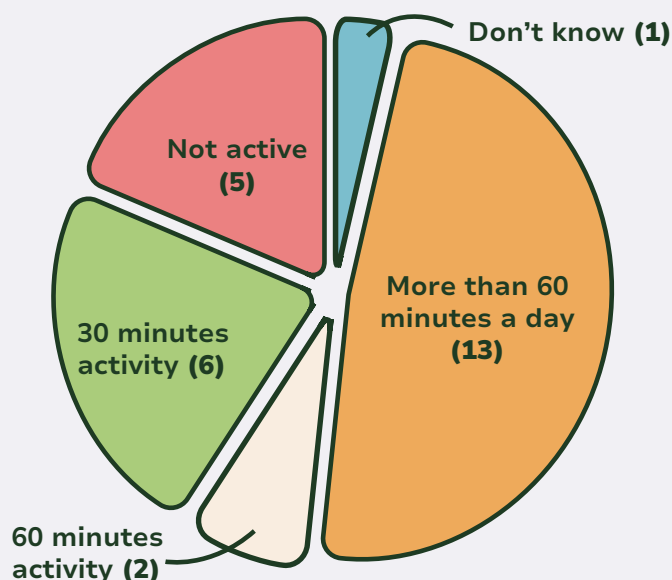


Figure 21: Responses to Young People's Survey, "How active are you each day? (examples – walking, wheeling, running or playing sports)?"

Irish Government guidelines recommend at least an average of 1 hour per day of moderate to vigorous intensity activity across a week for age 5 – 17 years to improve heart health and reduce disease risk including cancer and type 2 diabetes as well as for improved mood and sleep. Meanwhile, sedentary activity can erode these benefits. For those aged 18+ (up to 65 years) this changes to a weekly target of at least 2 hours and 30 minutes to 5 hours of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity or a more intense vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity for at least 1 hour and 15 minutes to 2 hours and 30 minutes over a week. For those living with disabilities a reduced level of activity may be adequate for health.¹⁴⁴

When asked about strength exercise 29% responded 'Not at all' while 18% responded four days or more, 11% three days and 14% two days, respectively. Overall, 43% participated in strength exercise for two or more days a week.

144 Healthy Ireland (2024), '[Every Move Counts, National Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines for Ireland.](#)'

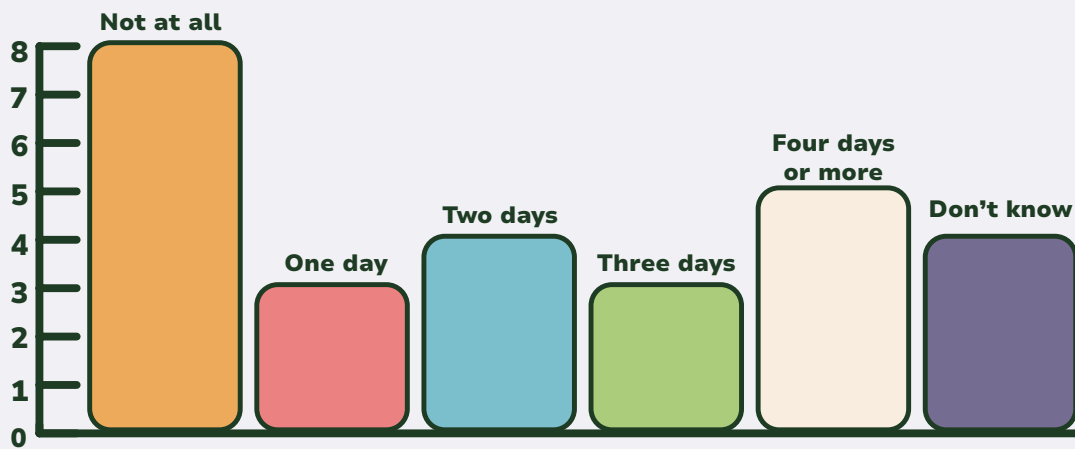


Figure 22: Responses to Young People’s Survey, “How many day(s) a week do you do strength exercise? (examples – climbing or body weight exercises)”

Guidelines for the Irish Government for age 5 – 17 years is to participate in strength activities for muscle and bone health three days a week. For those aged 18+ (to 65 years) additional muscle-strength training involving all major muscle groups is recommended on two or more days a week.¹⁴⁵

16. Any other comments

When given the opportunity to provide final comments the following statements were provided.

‘It is good to have healthy food’

‘My parents won’t have enough money to get us treats or nice meals’

¹⁴⁵ lbid



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