

School Catering Parents and Schools Research

Lancashire County Commercial Services

Research report

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1 Executive Summary

This research was carried out to measure the performance of the School Catering Service and in particular the effectiveness of its service level guarantee. Two sets of paper questionnaires were sent out to 55 schools, one for the parents of children who take school lunches, and one for the parents of children who do not. Nine thousand questionnaires were sent out and 1272 were returned, a response rate of 14%.

1.1 Key findings

- The majority of parents of children who take school lunches are satisfied with the service (83%).
- The healthiness of the food is considered the most important factor for school lunches, for school meals users (86%) and non users (74%). Three in ten parents whose children do not take school lunches say that the price is an important factor (31%).
- School meals users are generally satisfied with the school lunch menu (81%), though only 21% describe themselves as very satisfied.
- Both sets of parents put their children's preferences for a protein meal in the same order, with white meat (eg chicken) the most preferred, followed by cheese (eg pizza).
- Pasta dishes (eg lasagne) are the preferred carbohydrate dish for both sets of children. The second most preferred option is a potato dish (eg shepherds pie) for children who take a school lunch, and bread dishes (eg sandwiches) for those who don't.
- Three-quarters of respondents said they had received information about the school lunch service once a school term or less.
- Seven in ten parents rated their child's lunch as at least fairly healthy (69%). The vast majority of parents think their children's overall diet is healthy (87% very or fairly healthy). Only 66% of BME respondents rate their child's diet as healthy.
- The top reason for not taking a school lunch was for the parents to ensure they know what they are eating (45%), because the child gets a hot meal in the evening (40%), and that they prefer a packed lunch (37%).

1.2 Recommendations

- Encourage children who have never taken a school lunch to try one, possibly by a free or subsidised offer.
- Consider the schools' menus, and whether these reflect the children's preferred meals outlined in the report.
- Look into the message of communications to parents; healthiness and value should be the key points to highlight.
- Investigate the reasons for parents from an ethnic minority being less likely to have received communications from the service.
- Repeat this survey in two years time to see whether attitudes have changed.

2 Background

Lancashire County Commercial Services (LCCS) employs over 3,500 frontline personnel who undertake catering, cleaning and school crossing services to customers across Lancashire.

Every day they serve over 50,000 meals, clean 400 buildings and cross thousands of children safely on their way to school. The service relies on goodwill, public confidence and maintaining good relationships with all its customers to create long-term partnerships. It believes the key to success rests with its front-line employees, who are the best ambassadors to promote services.

LCCS provides services to schools, training centres, staff catering facilities, county councillors and the public in one of the largest authorities in the country. As such it is able to run a very cost-effective service, which, it believes, provides excellent value for money, quality food, a choice to suit all tastes and a service that strives to achieve 100% customer satisfaction.

LCCS currently provide more than 55,000 meals a day in more than 520 primary and special schools and 35 secondary schools. All catering contracts are managed directly for the school and this means that LCCS is able to provide a service tailored to the needs of individual schools.

Knowing how children's tastes change as they move from primary to secondary school is a key consideration for LCCS. In primary schools the menu is based around serving a balanced lunch containing all the key nutrients - lunches that children want to eat and parents want to pay for. With students in high schools becoming increasingly more sophisticated in their tastes, the accent is on choice with a wide range of meal options being available from different outlets.

3 Introduction

LCCS is looking to assess its current performance on delivering school meals in primary schools and to gain an understanding of the service improvements required. This research covers the parents of primary school children.

The research is being carried out to help develop the service, with the ultimate aim of increasing take-up of school meals from around 43% to achieving a target of 60% penetration within primary schools. Recently there has been considerable media activity on school meals that will see the Government introduce additional funding into school meals delivery. LCCS would like to maximise this money, by offering a service that will meet the needs of current customers and stimulate additional take-up.

To achieve this, research has been designed to generate appropriate baseline satisfaction data and provide service improvement information.

4 Research objectives

The research objectives were to:

- measure satisfaction levels of parents whose children use the service;
- examine barriers to parents whose children do not currently use the service; and
- assess development opportunities for the service from the parents of children who have and don't have school meals.

5 Methodology

A sample of 55 primary schools, from the 513 in Lancashire, were selected to take part in the survey. They were selected using a stratified method to ensure a proportionate spread around the county as well as to ensure enough responses from schools with different contracts and free meal take-ups could be analysed.

The sampled schools were sent two sets of paper questionnaires, one for the parents of children who take school lunches, and one for the parents of children who do not. The numbers sent to each school depended on the proportion of pupils taking a school lunch. Each school was sent enough questionnaires to cover all pupils. The questionnaires were distributed to children via the schools, and parents returned them through a freepost address directly to the county council's research department. Nine thousand questionnaires were sent out and 1272 were returned, a response rate of 14%.

6 Limitations

The low response rate is a limitation on this research. The fact that some schools gave a very low or zero response means there could have been a problem with the distribution of questionnaires to the schools. The reliance of children to take the questionnaires home to their parents will also have contributed to the lower response rate, since many are likely to have got lost on the way home.

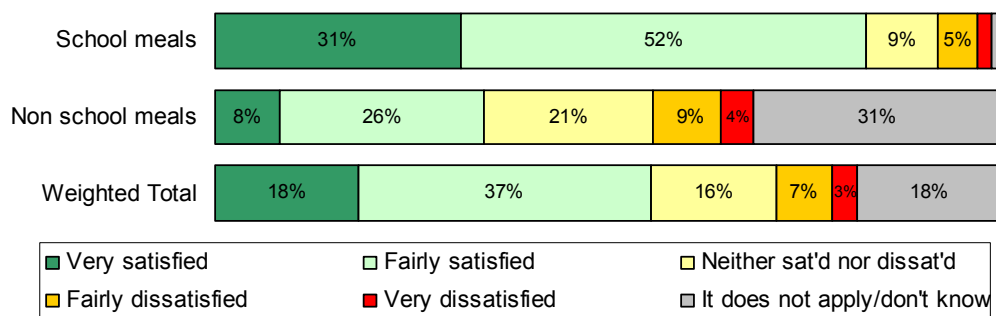
7 Main Research Findings

7.1 Overall satisfaction with the school lunch service

The first question on the questionnaire asked both the parents of children who both use and do not use the schools meal service how satisfied they are with the service. These are both shown in the chart below, along with the total result, weighted to reflect the correct proportions of school meals and non school meals users.

The majority of parents of children who take school lunches are satisfied with the service (83%), with only 7% dissatisfied. A large proportion of those whose children do not take a school lunch do not express an opinion on the school lunch service, as might be expected (31% saying it doesn't apply / don't know).

Chart 1 - How satisfied are you with the school lunch service overall?



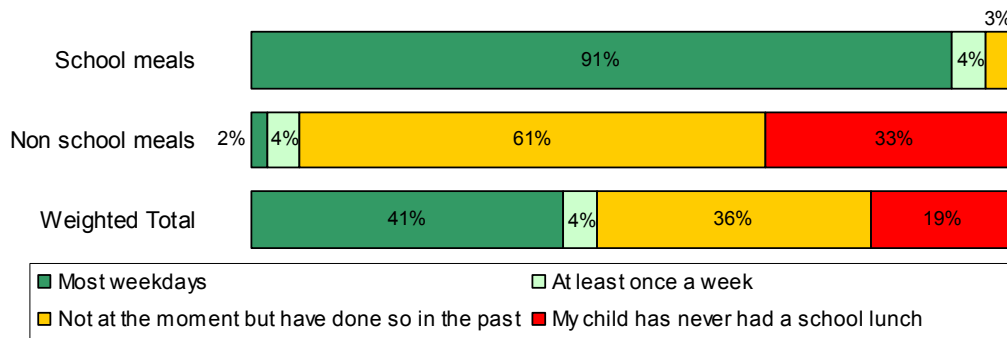
Base: All respondents (school meals 708, non school meals 1079, weighted total 1251)

Looking at the satisfaction rate by different factors influencing the service, the smallest schools¹ received significantly lower satisfaction scores than other schools, (42% satisfied). This reflects the lower take up of school meals in smaller schools. Looking specifically at those who use the service, schools with either a servery or a cook servery contract type (74% satisfied) received a significantly lower score than those with a kitchen or main kitchen (81%), but the majority were still satisfied.

The next question asked parents how often their children take a school lunch, the majority of those who do, take one most days. Children who attend schools with cook serveries and serveries were less likely to take one most weekdays (both 28%). Children from an ethnic minority background were significantly more likely to take a lunch most days than white children (46% against 36%).

¹ Those with less than 150 pupils

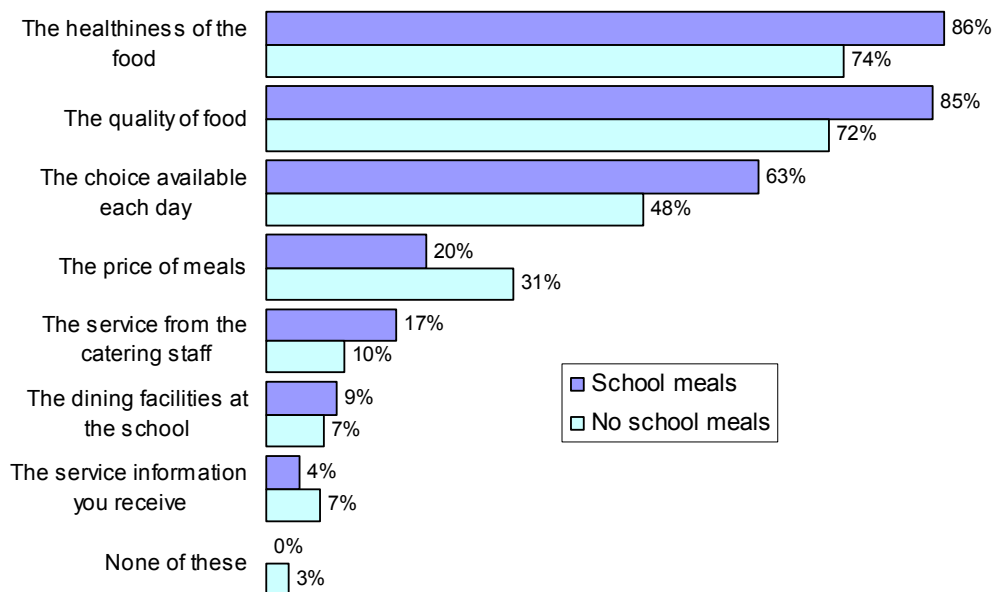
Chart 2 - How often, if ever does your child/ren normally have a school lunch, (provided by the school)?



Base: All respondents (school meals 708, non school meals 1079, weighted total 1251)

The healthiness of the food is considered the most important factor for school lunches, for school meals users (86%) and non users (74%), followed by the quality of the food. The choice available each day is also important for both, while the price of the meals is the only factor that is more important for parents of children with packed lunches (31% against 20%). The price of meals is also proportionally more important for parents whose children don't take a school lunch, since the other factors are seen as less important than for parents of children who do. This implies that value is particularly important for parents of children who don't take school meals, since the healthiness and quality are most important, with price also as a factor. Highlighting the value of school meals to parents of children who don't use the service should be important.

Chart 3 - Which of the following do you consider to be most important for your child/ren's school lunch?

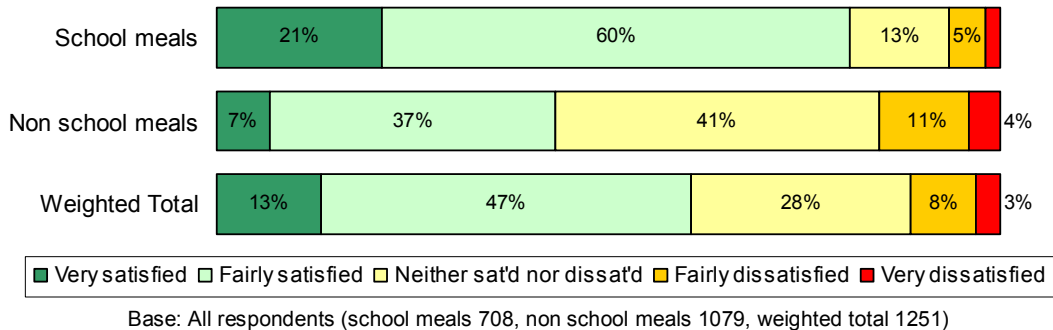


Base: All respondents (school meals 708, non school meals 1079, weighted total 1251)

School meals users are generally satisfied with the school lunch menu (81%), though only 21% describe themselves as very satisfied. About

one in seven parents of children who do not use the service are dissatisfied with the menu (15%).

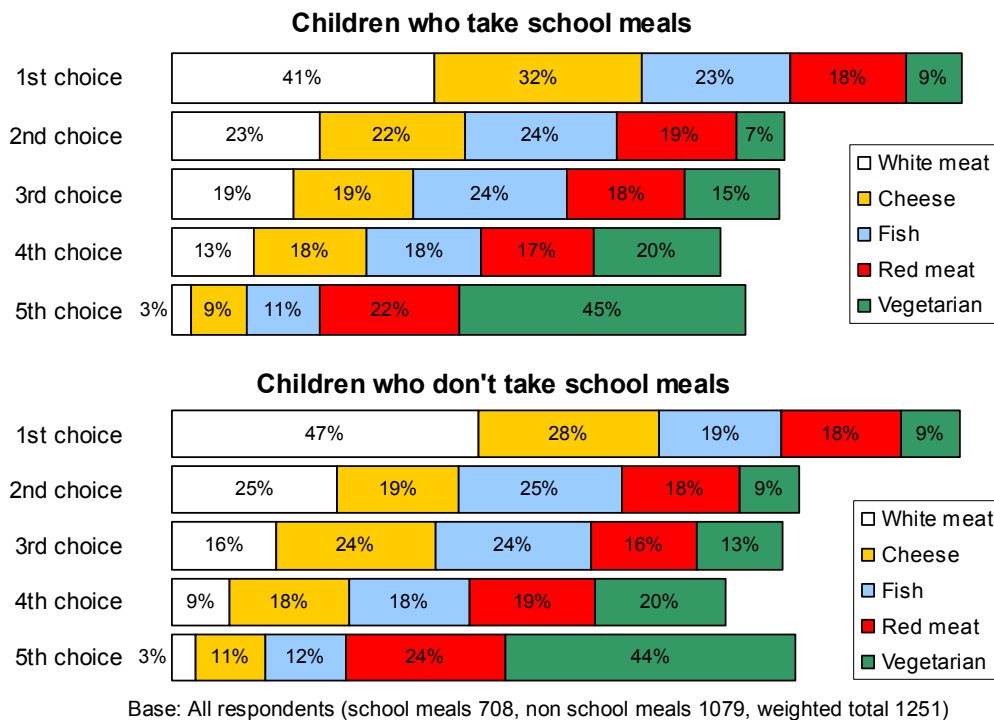
Chart 4 - How satisfied are you with what is on the school lunch menu overall?



7.2 Favourite foods

The parents were next asked to select their children’s favourite meals from a list, the first sources of protein and the second sources of carbohydrate, each with an example of the type. For the five types they were asked to rank the preference from one to five, (where one is the most favourite and five the least favourite). The proportions rating each meal type from first to fifth are shown in the charts below.

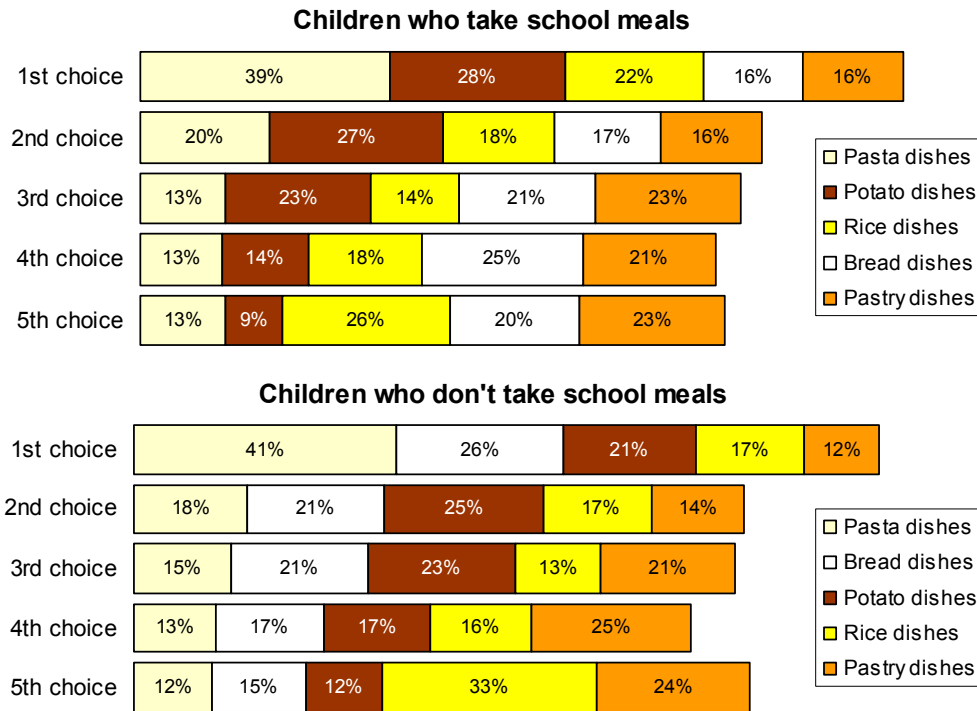
Chart 5 - Generally speaking, what type of meal does your child enjoy eating the most?



Both sets of parents put their children’s preferences for a protein meal in the same order, with white meat (eg chicken) as the top preference for at least two in five children. Cheese based meals (eg pizza), fish (eg fish

fingers) and red meat (eg roast beef) are the next preferred. Only one child in eleven has vegetarian (eg vegetable pasta bake) as the highest option, and almost half put it as the fifth choice amongst the options. Since both sets of parents agree on the preferences of their children, it is important to know whether the menus reflect these preferences.

Chart 6 - And, generally speaking, what type of dish does your child most enjoy eating?



Base: All respondents (school meals 708, non school meals 1079, weighted total 1251)

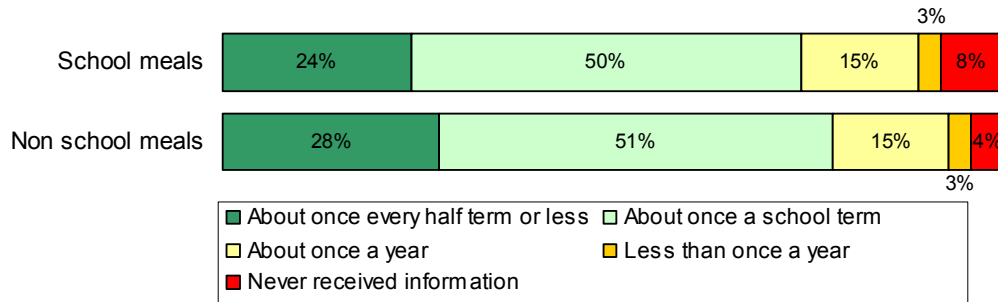
Pasta dishes (eg lasagne) are the preferred carbohydrate dish for both sets of children. There is a difference on the second option though, with children who take a school lunch preferring potato dishes (eg shepherds pie) and those who don't preferring bread dishes (eg sandwiches). As these will be the basis of many packed lunches, perhaps this is not too surprising. Again the preferred dish types need to be reflected in the school menu.

Three-quarters of respondents said they had received information about the school lunch service once a school term or less. Parents of children who don't take school meals are slightly more likely to have received information than parents of children who do. This means that information is getting through, which is important to know, and therefore there must be other reasons for not taking school meals. It may be useful to consider the messages going out in the communications to see whether they can be made more relevant, (such as the message of value mentioned earlier).

Looking demographically, parents from an ethnic minority are significantly more likely to say they have never received information on

the school meals (20%) than white parents (4%), which should be a concern. BME children are more likely to take a school meal, which would explain some of the difference, but this finding is worth further investigation in the future.

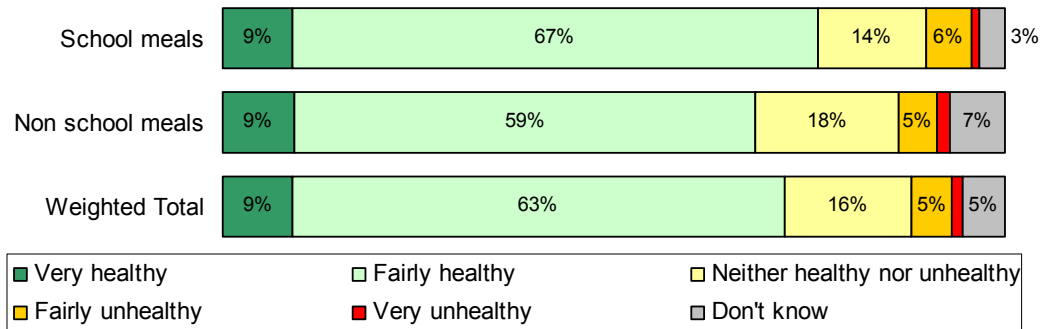
Chart 7 - How often do you receive information about the school lunch service?



Base: All respondents (school meals 708, non school meals 1079, weighted total 1251)

The chart below shows the proportions rating their child’s lunch as healthy or unhealthy. Seven in ten parents rated this as at least fairly healthy (69%). There were no significant differences by subgroup however.

Chart 8 - How healthy do you think your child/ren’s school lunch is?

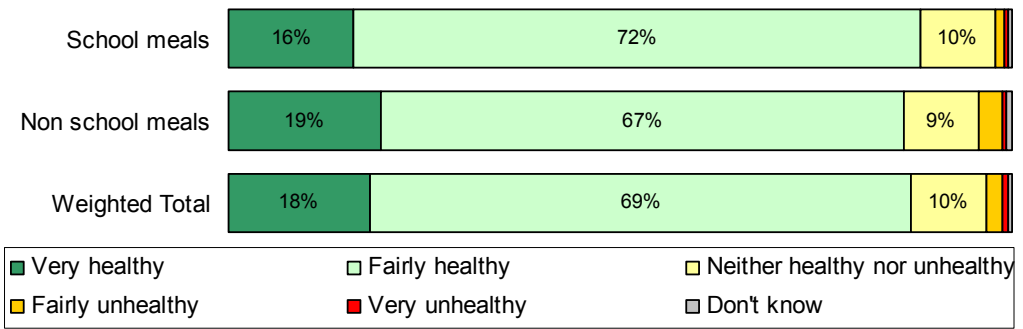


Base: All respondents (school meals 708, non school meals 1079, weighted total 1251)

The vast majority of parents think their children’s overall diet is healthy (87% very or fairly healthy), with more thinking so than for the school lunch, (though whether this is reality or just a perception is unclear).

There are two significant differences by subgroup on this question, with parents from a BME background and from schools with a high proportion of students receiving free meals were both less likely to say their child’s overall diet was healthy, (66% BME and 80% for schools with a high free meals rate).

Chart 9 - And how healthy do you think your child/ren's diet overall is?



Base: All respondents (school meals 708, non school meals 1079, weighted total 1251)

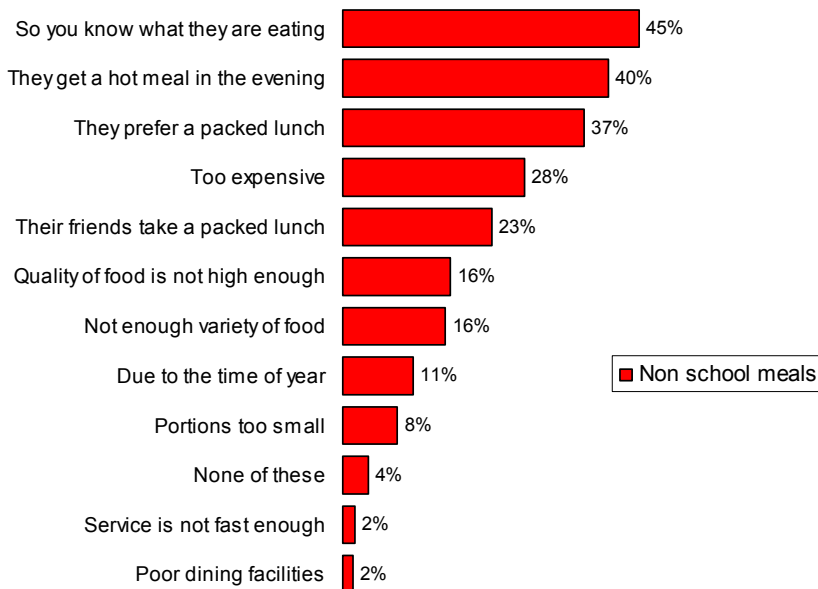
7.3 Parents of children who do not take a school lunch

Two extra questions were asked to the parents of children who don't take a meal in school. These were for how long it has been since they last took a school lunch, and the reasons why they don't take one.

There is a wide spread for the last time children have taken a school lunch, ranging from less than one month to five years. As outlined earlier, one in three of these children have never taken a school lunch. The average time since taking a meal for those that have done so is just under 9 months.

The top reason for not taking a school lunch was for the parents to ensure they know what they are eating (45%), because the child gets a hot meal in the evening (40%), and that they prefer a packed lunch (37%). Only just over one in four says that it is because school lunches are too expensive (28%). Since less than two in four parents say that their child prefers a packed lunch, this raises the question of how much the decision to take school lunches comes from the parent rather than the child. Also, it seems important to explore further exactly what parents want to know about what their children are eating, (eg the healthiness, quality or variety).

Chart 10 - What are the main reasons why your child/ren does not have a school lunch?



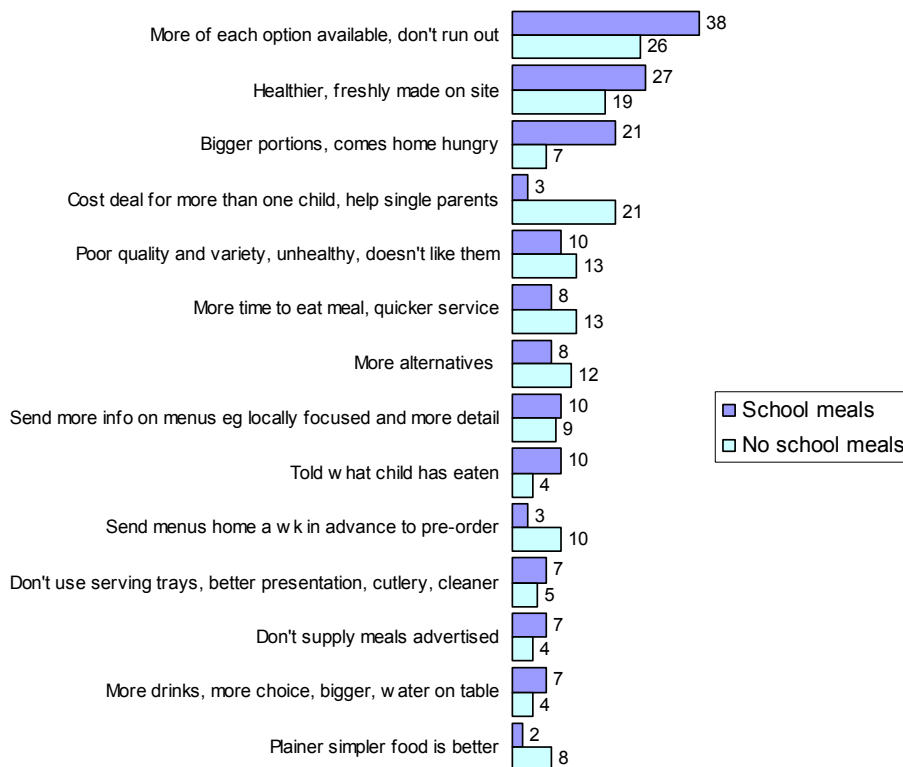
Base: All respondents (school meals 708, non school meals 1079, weighted total 1251)

Parents whose children have **never** taken a school lunch were more likely to say the main reason is so they know what the child is eating (58%), than those whose children have taken a school lunch in the past (38%). It is important for these parents to find out more about the meals, perhaps by encouraging the children who have never taken a school lunch to try one.

This question also included space for respondents to add any of their own reasons for not taking a meal in school. The top reasons given here were that the child doesn't like the food (38), or that the child is a fussy eater (32). Ensuring there is enough food at all sittings would encourage 31 respondents to take up school lunches.

Parents were also given the space to add their own comments on the service, which are displayed in the chart below. The top comment is to make more of each meal option available (64 mentions), followed by healthier, more freshly made food (48). The second answer for people who don't take school meals is that more assistance is needed with the expense, by deals for more than one child, or help for single parents (21).

Chart 11 - Have you any comments about the school lunch service?
(Answers given by 10+ people)



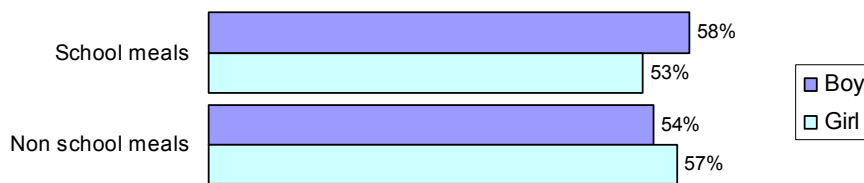
Base: All respondents giving a comment about the service (439)

7.4 Demographic information

The last questions on the survey asked for the demographic details of the parents' children of primary school age.

The first demographic question asked for the gender of the children. Girls appear slightly less likely to take school meals, but this is not strong enough to be statistically significant.

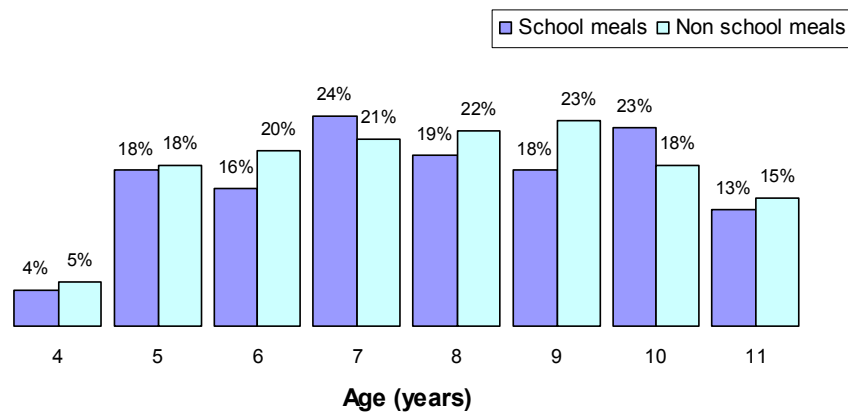
Chart 12 - Gender of children



Base: All respondents (school meals 708, non school meals 1079)

There is a wide spread of ages, with a mean age of 7.8 years.

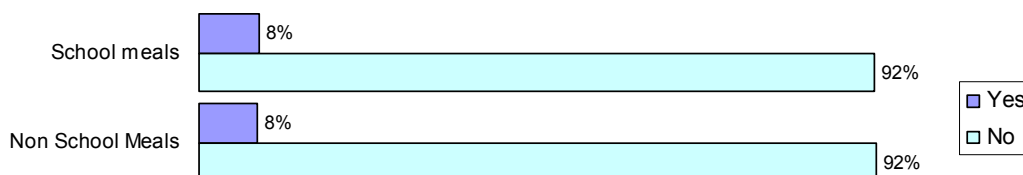
Chart 13 - Age makeup



Base: All respondents (school meals 708, non school meals 1079)

About one in twelve of the children are considered to have a long-standing illness by their parents (8%).

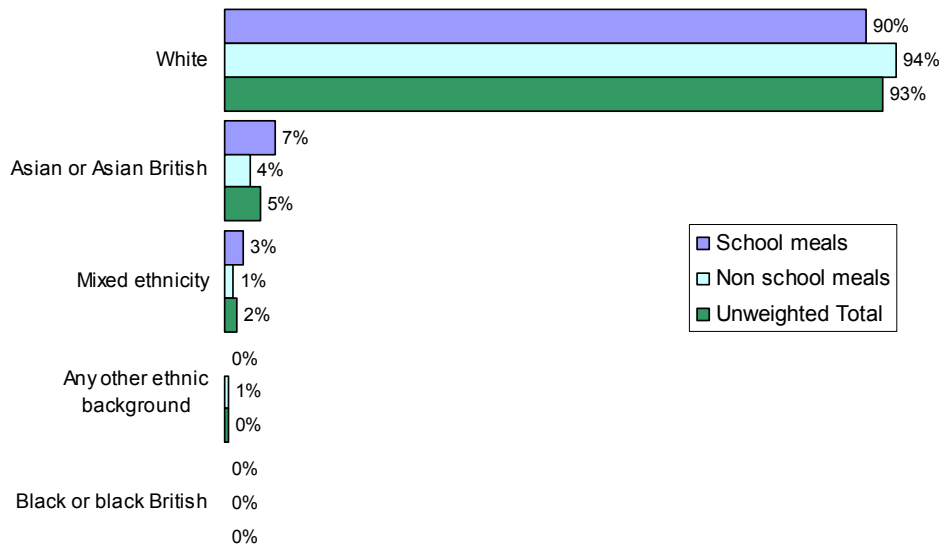
Chart 14 - Do any of these children have a long-standing illness or disability?



Base: All respondents (school meals 708, non school meals 1079)

Overall, the majority of children are of white ethnic origin, though about one in twenty is of Asian heritage, reflecting the wider population of Lancashire.

Chart 15 - To which of these groups do you consider your child/ren belong?



Base: All respondents (school meals 708, non school meals 1079)