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BMJ INVESTIGATION

Junk food suppliers have “shocking” major presence at UK’s biggest school food event

*As the government prepares to introduce updated school food standards, The BMJ finds that more than a third of the firms exhibiting at a major school food show sell products high in fat, sugar, or salt. Experts say children—and society—will pay the consequences of an “obesogenic environment” in schools, reports **Sophie Borland***

Sophie Borland *freelance journalist*

More than a third of the firms exhibiting at the UK’s largest school food show sell products high in fat, sugar, or salt (HFSS), *The BMJ* has found.

In total, 52 of the 137 companies with stands at this year’s event in Birmingham supply items such as hot dogs, pizza, muffins, and fizzy drinks.

An expert in child and adolescent nutrition says the findings were “shocking” and “clearly go against school food standards.”

Billed as the only national event “dedicated exclusively to school food,” the School Food People Show and Forum attracts over 1000 delegates annually from across the catering industry. It is described as an “unmissable opportunity” for would-be suppliers and a “platform” where they can show off their products, build relationships with school food caterers, and start conversations that may lead to new contracts.

This year the firms were given the chance to provide free samples of their products for delegates to have for lunch, and *The BMJ* saw large servings of hot dogs, sausage rolls, biscuits, and fizzy drinks being handed out.

The School Food People, the main trade group for school food caterers, which organises the show (box 1), says in a statement: “The presence of a company or product at the event does not constitute an endorsement of everything within that company’s wider commercial portfolio, nor does it mean that every product displayed will appear on a school menu.”

But public health experts say that the offerings exhibited at the show normalise an unhealthy grab-and-go culture of processed snacks rather than nutritious plated meals in schools and that it reflects a “norm” of non-compliance with school food standards in secondary schools.

The BMJ’s findings come as the government prepares to introduce updated school food standards that will limit availability of HFSS foods to children in schools and replace them with healthier options and more fruit and vegetables.

The BMJ found that some of the muffins being offered to delegates at the show contained more than the total daily recommended sugar intake for secondary

school aged children. There were also cans of soft drink, promoted as being “school compliant,” with more than half the daily sugar allowance.

D’Arcy Williams, chief executive of the youth activist food charity Biteback, says the findings “expose a pretty extraordinary contradiction: at the very moment we’re preparing to raise the bar on school food, too much of the industry surrounding our schools is still promoting the same unhealthy products we’re trying to move away from.”

“Perpetuating an obesogenic environment”

Experts tell *The BMJ* that although school meals have improved in the past 20 years since a high profile campaign by the television chef Jamie Oliver, food in secondary schools in particular is dominated by an unhealthy “grab and go” culture.

Pupils are offered items such as pizza slices, savoury pasties, and muffins that can be eaten on the move to cater for the fact they have short lunch breaks and don’t want to spend their time sitting down for a meal in the canteen.

To investigate the extent to which school food is dominated by less healthy items, *The BMJ* attended the School Food People Show and Forum in Birmingham in early July.

We found that of the 137 companies exhibiting their products, 52 (38%) supply food or drink that is considered HFSS under the government’s classification system (box 2).¹

These included two specialist hot dog firms, a Belgian waffle maker, and another five companies selling cakes, cookies, or muffins. One of these was displaying lemon and white chocolate muffins with 35.5 g of sugar and triple chocolate muffins containing 31 g of sugar. The recommended daily sugar intake is 30 g for adults and secondary school aged children.

Other firms included the manufacturer of the fizzy drink Irn Bru and the firm behind Mr Kipling cakes, Premier Foods.

Greg Fell, president of the Association of Directors of Public Health and director of public health for Sheffield City Council, tells *The BMJ*: “What gets marketed is what gets sold, and if those kinds of trade shows are an indicator of what goes into the school

meals' process and system then we're perpetuating an obesogenic environment."

The School Food People says in its statement to *The BMJ* that many of its exhibitors supply thousands of products and that "their ranges for school and their wider offering is not always comparable because it is not 'like for like.' Categorising offerings as 'HFSS,' for example, because some of the products it manufactures or distributes outside the school market may fall within that definition, is not a true representation."

It adds that assessment of how products are presented and sampled at the event "should clearly distinguish between an exhibition for adult professionals and the balanced meals actually provided in schools."

At the show were also seven wholesalers selling chocolate bars, crisps, and sweets, one of which had a display stand full of bags of Walkers crisps, Lucozade, Mars bars, and Kit Kats, with a sign saying "Please help yourself."

Five ice cream firms were present, four soft drinks companies, and other suppliers that make items including pizzas and cake mixes and confectionery vending machines.

Beth Bradshaw, lead on policy and advocacy at the Obesity Health Alliance, a coalition of about 70 health organisations, says, "It just seems completely contradictory to allow them to have that space and presence."

Alice Wiseman, vice president of the Association of Directors of Public Health and a director of public health in Gateshead and Newcastle, adds, "The reason that they're there is that they know that will increase their sales. They wouldn't spend money on being there and sponsoring an event if they didn't think it would benefit them."

"Shocking" and against school food standards

Marie Murphy, assistant professor of child and adolescent nutrition at the University of Birmingham, has done research into secondary schools that found that more than 80% were selling cakes, pastries, confectionary, or chocolate products. Commenting on the school food show, she says, "It does surprise me, because the items you're talking about clearly go against school food standards."

"To see that those kinds of behaviours are happening within school food events like the one you went to is quite shocking. You think now is the time to be working alongside these companies and looking for solutions that allow children to have a healthy diet."

Rob Percival of the food and farming charity the Soil Association says, "It's illustrative of the real problem in the background. The ideal for school food is that we're producing lots of fresh meals with well trained staff and kitchens, not that we're at a show with lots of processed products being flogged all over the place, regardless of their nutritional content."

School food came under the spotlight in 2005 when Jamie Oliver launched a campaign to ban Turkey Twizzlers, strips of processed meat with high levels of fat.

The coalition government introduced new standards in January 2015 that required schools to provide at least one portion of vegetables a day, offer no more than two portions of fried food a week, and promote water over fruit juice.²

But there is no system for checking schools, and research by Murphy and colleagues at the University of Birmingham has found that most of these standards are not being followed.³

Referring to the state of school food generally, Murphy says, "It's a massive concern. What's being offered in secondary schools as the default is suboptimal."

"It really prevents that healthy habit formation at a really important stage of life."

Percival says that "non-compliance [with school food standards] is the norm in secondary schools."

"School compliant" drinks with half a day's sugar

Meanwhile, the latest figures from England's national child measurement programme show that obesity rates in schoolchildren are at their highest since the covid pandemic. One in 10 children starting school in England has obesity, with the proportion rising to one in five by the time children leave primary school.

To tackle the rising childhood obesity prevalence and other health concerns, the government announced in April it would introduce new standards to make school meals healthier and more balanced. The proposals call for deep fried foods to be banned altogether and items such as pizza and sausage rolls limited to twice a week, with ice cream and sweetened baked products such as cookies and muffins limited to once a week. The government's consultation on the plans closed in June, with results due to be published in September. Should the proposals go ahead they will take effect in primary schools from September 2027 and in secondary schools from September 2028.⁴

The new school standards would also ban fruit juice and many soft drinks and encourage children to drink water.

But *The BMJ* found that some of the soft drinks being exhibited at the school food show were being promoted as "school compliant" despite containing high levels of sugar.

These include Refresco's SUSO range: a 250 ml can of either the orange and mandarin or the mango and passionfruit flavour has 19.75 g of sugar, nearly two thirds the recommended daily intake of 30 g for adults and children over 11.

Some of Radnor Hills' ranges are also high in sugar: a 330 ml bottle of the orange and mango Radnor Fizz claims to be "school compliant" but contains 16.5 g sugar.

Both are a "combination" drink of fruit juice and water with no other added sugar. Under the government's current HFSS definition, a soft drink is not classified as containing added sugar if it contains only sugars from fruit or vegetable juice, and the existing school food standards allow for a maximum 330 ml portion size of such combination drinks.

A spokesperson for Refresco says SUSO is intended to be "one option as part of a balanced diet and is not a replacement for whole fruit or water." They add, "SUSO was specifically developed to comply with the Department for Education's school food standards."

Radnor Hills says in a statement: "We fully support the objective of providing children with balanced and nutritious diets, with water remaining the default drink in schools. We also believe that appropriate choice has a role to play and that the nutritional contribution of fruit juice should be recognised alongside consideration of its naturally occurring sugars."

"We are aware of the government's consultation on proposed changes to the school food standards and will, of course, review our range and guidance in line with the final standards once confirmed."

The School Food People says, “Ultimately, schools and their caterers decide what is placed on children’s plates and are responsible for ensuring that their menus comply with the statutory school food standards, including the restrictions on foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar. We support strong, well funded school food standards and robust monitoring and are working with the government to deliver the best possible nutrition for schoolchildren across the UK.”

Biteback’s Williams says the new standards “are a huge opportunity” but adds, “Standards on paper aren’t enough. We need proper enforcement and wraparound support for schools. We also need suppliers to step up.”

“Chocolate is always going to sell”

Experts say that one of the problems facing caterers is that items such as chocolate bars, muffins, and fizzy drinks have some of the highest profit margins and highest sales. They enable catering firms to make up for the losses on nutritious plated meals that are more expensive to produce and less popular. Murphy, of the University of Birmingham, says one caterer had explained to her that “chocolate is always going to sell.”

Murphy adds, “There are three different elements: what do the kids want, what’s going to sell, and what’s going to be healthy.”

The government has not confirmed how it will monitor schools’ compliance with the new rules, and catering firms are concerned that pupils will reject their healthier meals and instead bring in packed lunches full of snacks.

Bradshaw says, “We are at a pivotal point, which is why it’s really disappointing that you have this school food forum that seems in total conflict with the direction of travel.”

Fell adds, “I’m not surprised that schools will of course take the path of least resistance, but there’s a consequence of that—and the consequence is we’re perpetuating an environment where childhood overweight and obesity is the norm.

“Society will have to pay the consequences of that, 20, 30, or 40 years down the line.”

Box 1: School food trade body funded by cake firms

The BMJ discovered that the main trade group for school food caterers, the School Food People (formerly LACA (Lead Association for Caterers in Education)), which organises the annual School Food People Show and Forum, is sponsored by firms supplying pizzas, cakes, waffles, and ice cream.

Nine of the group’s 22 partners supply food and drinks high in fat, sugar, or salt (HFSS); one is Premier Foods, whose brands include Mr Kipling cakes and Cadbury Mini Rolls.

Other partners include the Belgian waffle producer Wafflemeister, Middleton Foods, which sells cake mixes, and the soft drink firm Radnor Hills.

There are also two wholesalers, Bidfood and Brakes, which sell crisps, chocolate bars, and sweets; the Pizza Plus Food service; Unilever, which makes Hellmann’s mayonnaise; and Yeo Valley, which supplies ice cream (as well as yoghurts that are not HFSS).

All of these firms were exhibiting at the event, and several were handing out free samples and cans.

Box 2: How we calculated our numbers

The BMJ based its calculations on the exhibitors listed in the physical brochure for the School Food People Show and Forum 2026, which was given to people attending.

Companies were designated as supplying foods high in fat, sugar, or salt if they were found to supply any item that meets the government’s definition of HFSS.¹ This includes companies whose main product is not designated HFSS under this definition.

We did not include in our HFSS list three firms that claim to make healthier versions of typically HFSS foods, including healthier pizzas, roasted crisps, and low sugar jelly and whip.

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