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Understanding food provision and eating environments in English special schools

Submission date
29/08/2024

Recruitment status
No longer recruiting

Registration date
20/09/2024

Overall study status
Completed

Last Edited
22/11/2024

Condition category
Other

[ ] Prospectively registered
[ ] Protocol
[ ] Statistical analysis plan
[ ] Results
[ ] Individual participant data
[ ] Record updated in last year

Plain English summary of protocol

Background and study aims

All state-funded schools in England must provide meals that meet standards, known as the School Food Standards (SFS). This includes special schools and alternative provision (AP) such as Pupil Referral Units. Pupils who attend special schools/AP often have poorer diets. They may also be at a higher risk of future health problems linked to diet. Schools can support children to make healthy meal choices. Yet, special schools/AP may experience different challenges than mainstream schools to do so. Many pupils attending these settings have special educational needs (SEN). There is a need to review the quality of food provided in these settings. This will help to understand how to improve food provision in the future. This study aims to assess the food provided in special schools/AP by reviewing its nutritional value and whether it meets the SFS. The study will explore what actions special schools/APs take to support healthy eating and will also explore the influences upon healthy food provision and eating environments. Finally, the study will explore whether the research methods are feasible and suitable for special schools /AP and pupils with SEN.

Who can participate?

6-8 special schools/AP settings in the West Midlands and Northeast of England

What does the study involve?

The team will collect menus and visit schools to observe the food available and assess it against the SFS. They will also evaluate the nutritional quality of the meals provided. In each setting, they will conduct in-depth interviews with key staff and governors, inquiring about the challenges of supporting healthy eating in schools. Parents and pupils will also be asked about their experiences with school food. The researchers will employ creative methods to ensure the inclusion of a diverse range of children. Additionally, they will review the inclusivity and suitability of their methods for all schools and pupils involved.

Public Involvement: Two public advisory groups will guide the study, encompassing a broad spectrum of individuals connected to school food. The Schools/Practice Advisory Group will consist of senior leaders, caterers, support workers, and representatives from Local Authorities

and charities. Additionally, there will be a Child and Parent Group, from whom the team will seek advice on the study, including feedback on the findings and how best to meet the needs of children and parents participating in the research.

Sharing the Findings: The results of the study will be shared in a workshop with those involved in school meals in special schools/APs, including Local Authorities, the Department for Education, caterers, schools, parents, and pupils. The group will be asked to identify priorities for improving support for healthy eating. This will help the researchers develop an intervention to test in special schools or alternative provisions in the future. Additionally, a summary report will be created for schools, parents, and pupils, and a policy briefing will be prepared for government colleagues. This work aims to identify opportunities to better support healthy eating in special schools, addressing the increased risk of poor diet among pupils attending these schools and ultimately improving the future health of children.

What are the possible benefits and risks of participating?
Participants' views in this study will directly inform the development of future research aimed at supporting children in special schools or alternative provisions to maintain a healthy diet. The findings will be shared with schools, caterers, and government bodies, potentially influencing policies related to school food. No physical or emotional harm is anticipated as a result of participating in this research.

Where is the study run from?
This study is led by researchers at the University of Birmingham in partnership with researchers from the Universities of Northumbria and Edinburgh.

When is the study starting and how long is it expected to run for?
September 2023 to January 2025

Who is funding the study?
The National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR)

Who is the main contact?
Dr Marie Murphy (University of Birmingham), m.murphy.3@bham.ac.uk

Contact information

Type(s)
Public, Scientific, Principal investigator

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Additional identifiers

National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR)
164391

Study information

Scientific Title
Understanding food provision and eating environments in English special schools: Assessment of nutritional quality of meals, and challenges in ideal provision and eating environments

Acronym
FEAST

Study objectives
The aim is to assess the nutritional quality of meals, and challenges in optimal meal provision and eating environments in special/AP schools.

The objectives are:
1. Assess the nutritional quality of food provided in special/AP schools and compliance with the SFS.
2. Understand the specific actions, challenges, and requirements for special/AP schools and caterers regarding healthy school food provision and creating supportive eating culture /environments.
3. Evaluate the feasibility of recruiting special/AP schools, pupils and staff and the most suitable qualitative methods for children attending special/AP schools.

Ethics approval required
Ethics approval required

Ethics approval(s)
Approved 03/09/2024, University of Birmingham Research Ethics Committee (Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, United Kingdom; +44 (0)121 414 3344; s.l.cottam@bham.ac.uk), ref: ERN_2786-Jun2024

Primary study design
Observational

Study design
Mixed-methods observational study

Study type(s)
Other

Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied

Assess the nutritional quality of meals, and challenges in optimal meal provision and eating environments in special/alternative provision schools

Interventions
A mixed methods observational study in special/AP schools comprising
1. An assessment of food provision (objective 1)
2. A qualitative study to explore support for/challenges with healthy eating in these schools (objective 2)
3. An evaluation of recruitment and qualitative data collection methods (objective 3)

The expected outcomes are:
1. Mean percentage compliance with the SFS (objective 1)
2. Mean meal quality index score for school lunch (objective 2)
3. Challenges to healthy food provision/healthy eating support in these settings (objective 2)
4. Engagement metrics (i.e. meeting recruitment target; sample diversity; suitability of qualitative research methods) (objective 3)

Intervention Type
Behavioural

Primary outcome(s)
Mean compliance with the School Food Standards and mean meal quality index score for school lunches are measured using menu reviews and observations at one timepoint

Key secondary outcome(s)
1. Challenges to healthy food provision are measured using interviews and focus groups with young people, school staff, and parents at one timepoint
2. Engagement metrics are measured using participant feedback, reflective diaries, and research team discussions at one timepoint

Completion date
31/01/2025

Eligibility

Key inclusion criteria
1. Pupils (aged between 4-18 years old) at one of the 6-8 special/alternative provision schools in England recruited to the study
2. School staff/governors and catering managers at one of the 6-8 special/alternative provision schools in England recruited to the study
3. Parents of children attending one of the 6-8 special/alternative provision schools in England recruited to the study

Participant type(s)
Carer, Employee, Learner/student

Healthy volunteers allowed
No

Age group

Mixed

Lower age limit
4 Years

Sex
All

Key exclusion criteria
1. Unable to provide consent (or assent, for children under 16)
2. For children under 16, parental consent is also required

Date of first enrolment
16/09/2024

Date of final enrolment
31/12/2024

Locations

Countries of recruitment
United Kingdom

England

Study participating centre
University of Birmingham
Department of Applied Health Sciences
Murray Learning Centre
Edgbaston
Birmingham
United Kingdom
B15 2TT

Study participating centre
University of Northumbria at Newcastle
Faculty of Health and Life Sciences
Ellison Building A
Ellison Place
Newcastle upon Tyne
United Kingdom
NE1 8ST

Sponsor information

Organisation
University of Birmingham

ROR
https://ror.org/03angcq70

Funder(s)

Funder type
Government

Funder Name
National Institute for Health and Care Research

Alternative Name(s)
National Institute for Health Research, NIHR Research, NIHRresearch, NIHR - National Institute for Health Research, NIHR (The National Institute for Health and Care Research), NIHR

Funding Body Type
Government organisation

Funding Body Subtype
National government

Location
United Kingdom

Results and Publications

Individual participant data (IPD) sharing plan
The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study will be available upon request from the study Principal Investigator (Marie Murphy, m.murphy.3@bham.ac.uk) in alignment with FAIR (findable, accessible, interoperable and re-useable) principles wherever possible, following the cessation on the study. Only pseudonymised data will be made available in this way. These requests will be considered on a case-by-case basis and a data-sharing agreement will be required to ensure appropriate management and access. Where proposed usage extends beyond existing ethical approval, further approval and participant consent will be requested. The approach to data management will comply with Birmingham, Northumbria and Edinburgh's institutional data management standards and will align with the Data Protection Act 2018 and the UK General Data Protection Regulation as outlined in our data management plan and participant information.

IPD sharing plan summary
Available on request