

The chips are down!

Even the government minister responsible for school standards wouldn't want to eat our sausages. So what is National School Meals going to achieve?

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Even School Standards Minister, Jacqui Smith doesn't want to eat our school bangers!

For far too long school meals have been about oily chips, lumpy custard, dirty plates, and if you're really unlucky, an added side order of hair. Lovely.

So when we discovered that last week was National School Meals week, our first response was, so what?

However it also coincided with the launch of the first national nutrition standards for school meals in 20 years. In other words, there are now strict guidelines on what caterers can and can't put in our dinners. But the question is can they be trusted?

In many cases, pigs get fed our leftover school meals. All we can say is unlucky pigs. According to one recent report the sausages served up in our school canteens often contain slurry of pig and chicken bones (otherwise known as mechanically recovered meat).

With this in mind, we asked Jacqui Smith, the Schools Standards Minister, if she would want to eat them herself.

"I think all cheap sausages contain that actually, and no I wouldn't particularly want to eat them which is why I want school dinners to offer a choice for people" she told reporters from Children's Express recently.

She continued: "What I want to see is all parents and children to be confident that what they're getting in their school meals is the ability to have a well balanced meal that's going to be enjoyable and they're going to choose over and above going down the chip shop. Basically, what I want is school meals that people want to eat and that will do them good."

According to our research Ms Smith is going to have her work cut out. Pupil, Danyel Edwards, 14, who attends Glademore School in north London says even given the choice of nice school dinners she'd still be a junk food fan. "School dinners are rubbish and horrible. They cook good stuff like pizza and chips and everything but they taste disgusting and you do find hair in things. I go out to Burger King."

Loui-Marie Ebanks, 12 who attends Stoke Newington School in north London doesn't mince her words either: "I think they are absolutely disgusting but I like the chips", she said.

Thomas Abney pupil, Cere-May, Ebanks 9, agrees with her elder sister's sentiments but goes one step further - she doesn't like chips: "They taste like they're made from powdered potato and when my vegetarian friend asked for something that didn't have meat in it, they gave her a plate of cheese."

Loui-Marie added to the culinary horror stories: "Once this boy in my class bought a turkey burger, but inside there was a big piece of crusty oily cheese, so he took it back and the dinner lady gave it to someone else. The worst thing is Christmas dinner; for that you get turkey, but it's just a piece of fat on your plate."

Hygiene, or the lack of it, also seems to be a major concern. "I think school dinners are nasty and they don't clean the tables and cutlery properly and the custard's lumpy and you get hair in your food", says 11-year-old Onome Edgeworth who goes to Highgate Wood School in north London.

He adds: "In my school kitchen they wash up the plates by just dipping them in hot water. The only solution is to bring packed lunch."

"The food in my school is really nasty, the chips are full of oil and the teachers have different things than the children", said his younger brother, nine-year-old Ebru, a pupil of Campsbourne Juniors in north London.

So what are we to conclude from this unscientific poll of unfortunate school dinners victims? That along with lumpy custard, oily food, stray hairs and crusty cheese, school dinners are as tasty as they always were?

Actually, it's not all bad news for Jacqui Smith. In fact, when it comes to puddings, with the exception of the custard, desserts get the thumbs up - most of time.

Loui-Marie is a fan of the cakes and sister Cere loves the Arctic roll. "I like them all except for the lumpy custard", Onome agrees. "I really like chips dipped in ice cream and chocolate custard on top."

Ebru confirms that his brother really does eat such unusual concoctions. "Yes he does and it's disgusting", he says.

But perhaps not as disgusting as some of the ingredients that go into school dinners. In the meantime, we'll have to wait and see if there really are any improvements to school meals. Perhaps things might change faster if they were put on the menu permanently the Department for Education and Employment where Jacqui Smith works. Hmmm, we wonder. With additional reporting from Zak Garner-Purkis and Elly Gordon. Ends

About the team

This article was produced by Della Hicks-Wilson, 15, Elly Gordon, 14, and Zak Garner-Purkis, 13. It was published as part of Teen Talk, the Children's Express page in [New Nation](#).

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