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# Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) Meals Survey

## Evaluation Report

Prepared by the Department of  
Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth  
[gov.ie/dcediy](https://www.gov.ie/dcediy)

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Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service

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# Introduction

First 5 is the whole-of-Government strategy to improve the lives of babies, young children and their families. It is a ten-year plan to help ensure that all children have positive early experiences and get a great start in life.

As part of this strategy, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) is in the process of developing policy on the provision of meals in early learning and care (ELC) and school age childcare (SAC) settings. In order for this work to be informed by current practice, the Department surveyed service providers currently receiving 'Meals Grants' from the Department of Social Protection (DSP). Approximately 150 service providers were in receipt of this grant in the 2020/21 school year, which either fully or partially funded meals provided to some or all children attending their services.

The primary aims of this survey were to:

1. evaluate the implementation and impact of the DSP-funded meals grants on service providers; and
2. determine a focus for future funding.

# Methodology

The survey evaluation presented in this report was conducted in May 2022 by the DCEDIY Research and Evaluation Unit (REU) on behalf of the DCEDIY Early Years, Policy & Strategy team. The survey was conducted using a mixed methods questionnaire, which was delivered via the EU Commission 'EU Survey' tool. There were 22 questions in total, which were designed by the REU in collaboration with the Early Years, Policy & Strategy team (see Appendix 2 to view the survey questions).

The questions were based on:

- discussions with the DCEDIY Early Years, Policy & Strategy team;

- a desk-based analysis of key documentation pertaining to the DSP grant scheme, including a [2020 Report on the DSP-funded Hot Meals Pilot Project in primary schools](#);
- a pilot survey of three service providers, which was conducted in February 2022.

On 23rd March 2022, 146 service providers in receipt of DSP were emailed by the REU with an invitation to participate in the survey. Those invited were informed that participation in the survey is voluntary, and that the information they share will strictly be used for the purpose of the informing the policy development in the DCEDIY. They were also asked to indicate if they would like to be part of a potential focus group to discuss this topic further.

The survey was closed on the 29<sup>th</sup> April, and responses were received from 86 service providers. Nine emails did not deliver, resulting in a 63% response rate from those successfully contacted. Survey responses were then analysed by the REU from 4<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> May. Close-ended questions were analysed using Microsoft Excel, and figures were generated using the results of these analyses. Open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively using the method of thematic analysis. The qualitative approach taken was inductive in nature, which allowed the data to determine the themes. Close-ended questions mainly related to the implementation of the grant, while open-ended questions were primarily used to assess the funding impact and draw out recommendations for future funding schemes.

Limitations of the evaluation include the lack of objective analysis of the funding impact, as service providers were asked to assess this impact based on their own subjective experiences, as well as the possibility that service providers may have been somewhat biased in their responses in anticipation of future funding.

# Key findings

## 1. Service information

- All 86 service providers that responded to the survey operate on a non-profit basis.
- The majority are based in Dublin.
- The most common service offered by providers is ECCE sessional.

## 2. Meal programme information

- The vast majority of service providers have been receiving the DSP-funded meal grant for 6 years or more.
- The most common DSP-funded meal offered was a hot lunch/dinner.

## 3. Information about participating children

- The most common number of children receiving meals as part of the grant programme was more than 50 children.
- The most common age range of children participating in the programme was the 3 – under 5 years age range.
- In the majority of cases, the service provides DSP-funded meals to all children attending the service.
- Among services where some children received DSP-funded meals but not all children, the majority of these services provided the same meals to all children in the service regardless of how the meals were funded.

## 4. Meal selection

- When asked which special dietary requirements the services cater for, the most common response was “nut allergies”.
- The majority of services responded that children are involved in choosing the food provided under the DSP-funded meals programme.
- When asked to assign a ranking from 1-10 to ten different priorities that could be considered when choosing meals, “meal quality” was most commonly selected as the highest priority, and “the amount of plastic waste” was most commonly selected as the lowest priority.

## 5. Facilities and staff

- The vast majority of service providers indicated that meal preparation was carried out onsite.
- When asked if the children eat in a specific dining facility, the most common response was that all children eat in their specific rooms.
- The majority of participants responded that the children are involved in preparing the food and/or cleaning up after the meal.
- The majority of participants indicated that it is a particular staff member's role to engage in the preparation of the meals.

## 6. Funding information

- The most common grant amount received each year was in the €500-5,000 range.
- When asked about funding coverage, the most common response was that the DSP grant covers some of the costs of the meals provided, for example, 50% of the cost of the meals provided to all children in the service.
- All participants receiving more than €20,001 a year had more than 50 children attending their service.
- The majority of participants rated the overall administration of the meals programme as "easy" or "very easy".

## 7. Funding impact

- When asked to describe the impact the DSP funding has on their service, the most common response was that it enabled them to provide a range of high quality and nutritious hot meals and snacks to children from a variety of different backgrounds each day, particularly disadvantaged backgrounds.

## 8. Recommendations for future schemes

- When asked for suggestions for how to improve the scheme going forward, the most common responses related to the funding quantity and the coverage of the meals programme, such as making the funded meals available for all children attending these services; taking inflation into account when allocating funding; and making the scheme more widely available to community-based services.
- A number of suggestions also related to the application process and the time associated with applying for the funding, the most common of which was the recommendation to set up an online application process to make the process more time efficient and reduce the amount of paperwork involved.



# Results

## 1. Service information

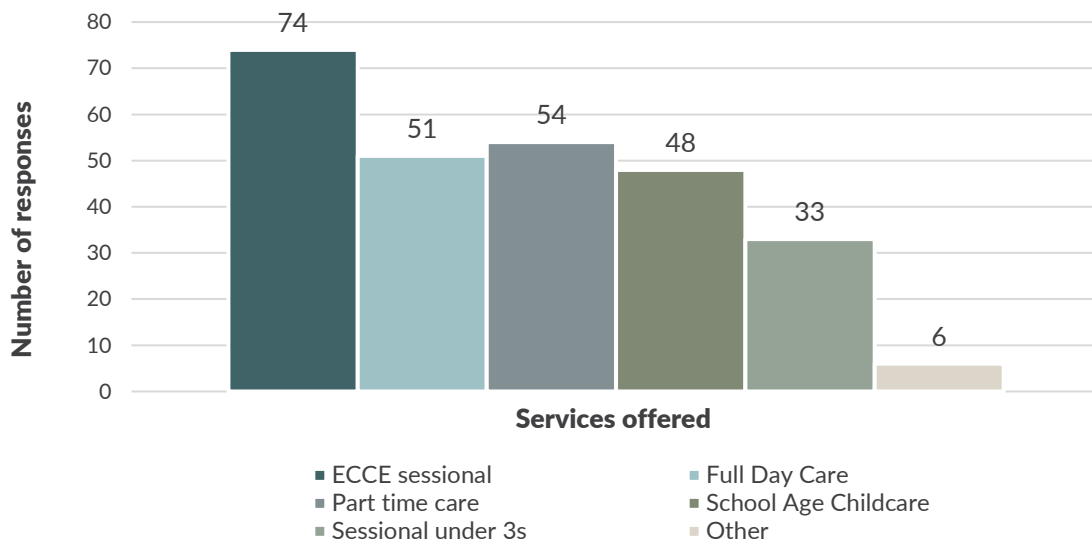


Figure 1: Services offered

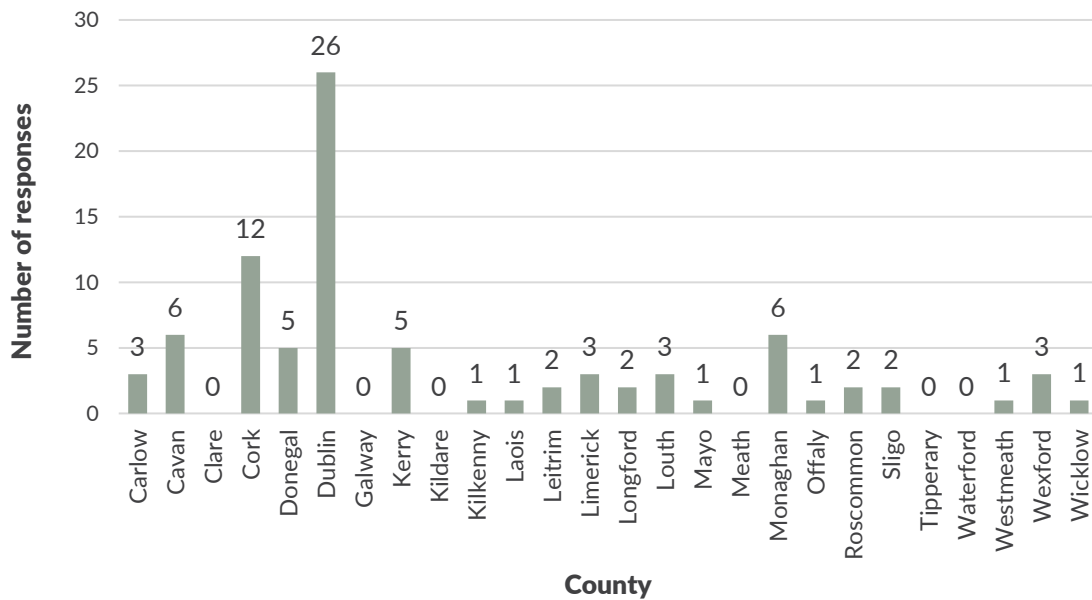


Figure 2: Service location

All services that responded to the study were non-profit or community services. When asked which services are offered by the organisation (see Figure 1), the most common answer was ECCE sessional; followed by part time care; full day care; school aged childcare; sessional under 3s; and “other”. Of those who selected other,

responses included holiday camps; breakfast clubs; lunch clubs; afternoon toddler groups; and extra hours for the families of enrolled children. When asked where the service was located (see Figure 2), the most common responses were Dublin (26); Cork (12); Monaghan (6); Cavan (6); Donegal (5); and Kerry (5). Counties not represented in the sample were Clare; Galway; Kildare; Meath; Tipperary; and Waterford.

## 2. Meal programme information

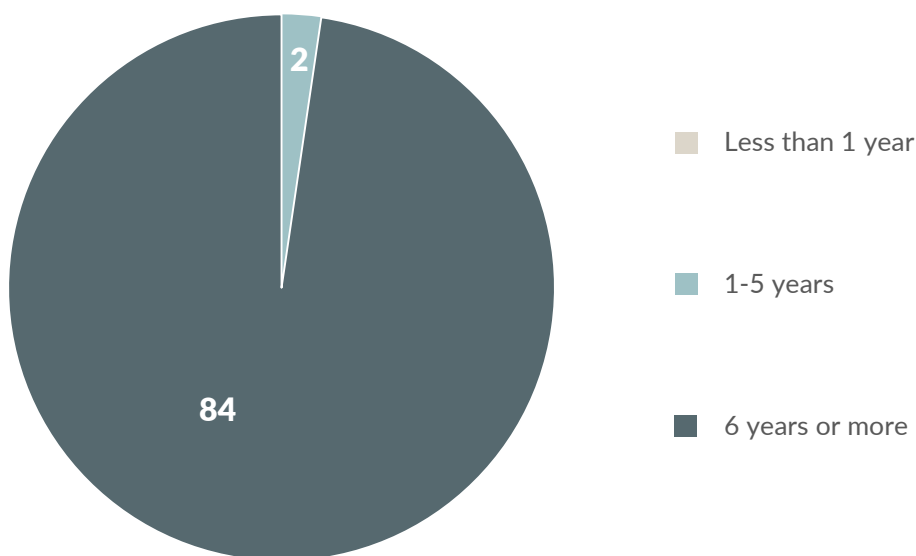


Figure 3: Duration of meals programme

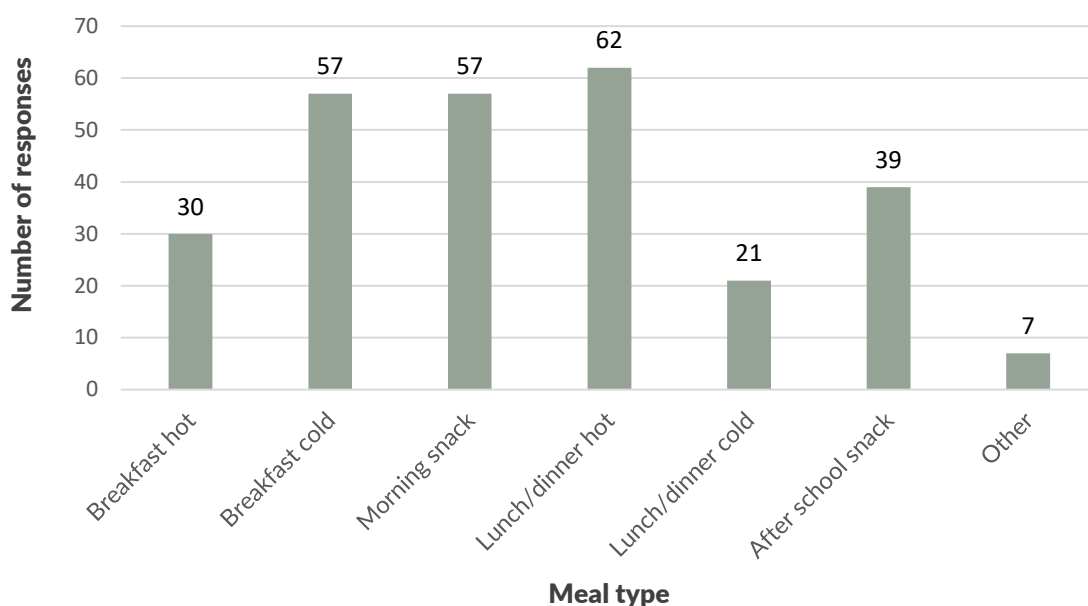


Figure 4: Type of meals provided

The majority of participants responded that they had offered DSP-funded meals for 6 years or more (84), followed by 1-5 years (2) (see Figure 3). No participants had offered DSP funded meals for less than 1 year. The most common DSP-funded meal offered was hot lunch/dinner (62); followed jointly by morning snack (57) and cold breakfast (57); after school snack (39); hot breakfast (30); cold lunch/dinner (21), and other (7) (see Figure 4). Other responses included afternoon/lunch snack, evening snack; after school hot dinner; and fruit on request.

### 3. Information about participating children

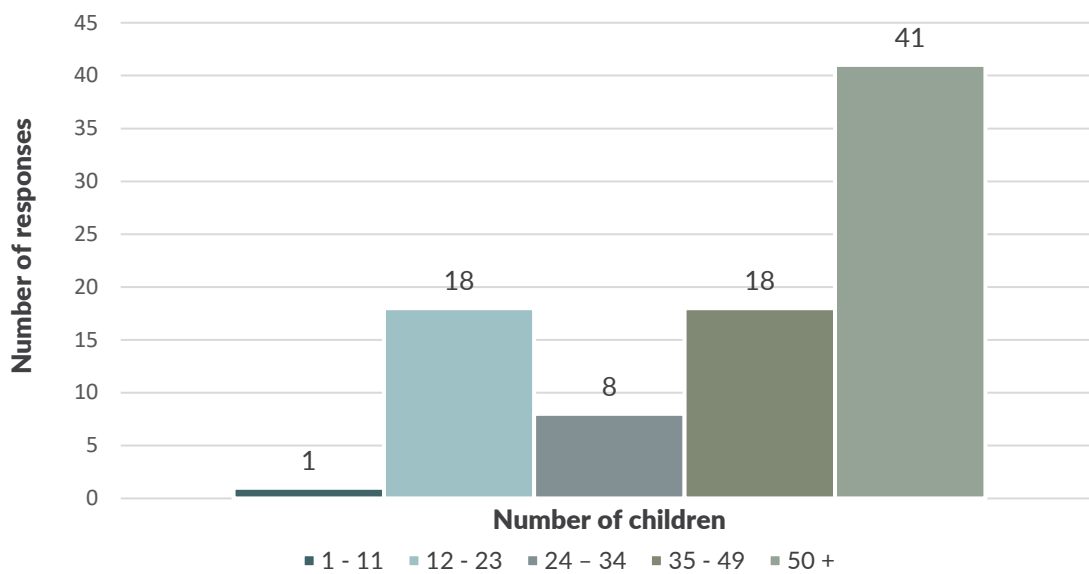


Figure 5: Number of participating children

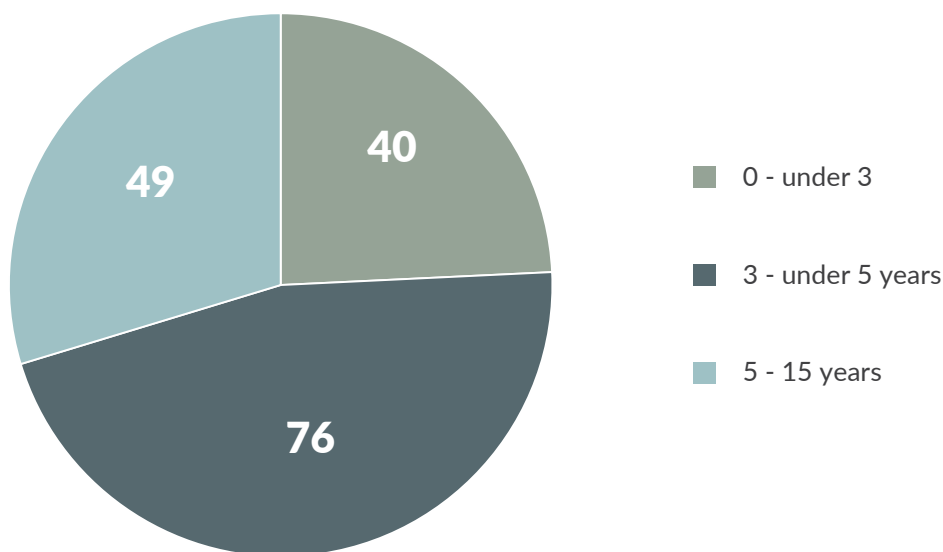
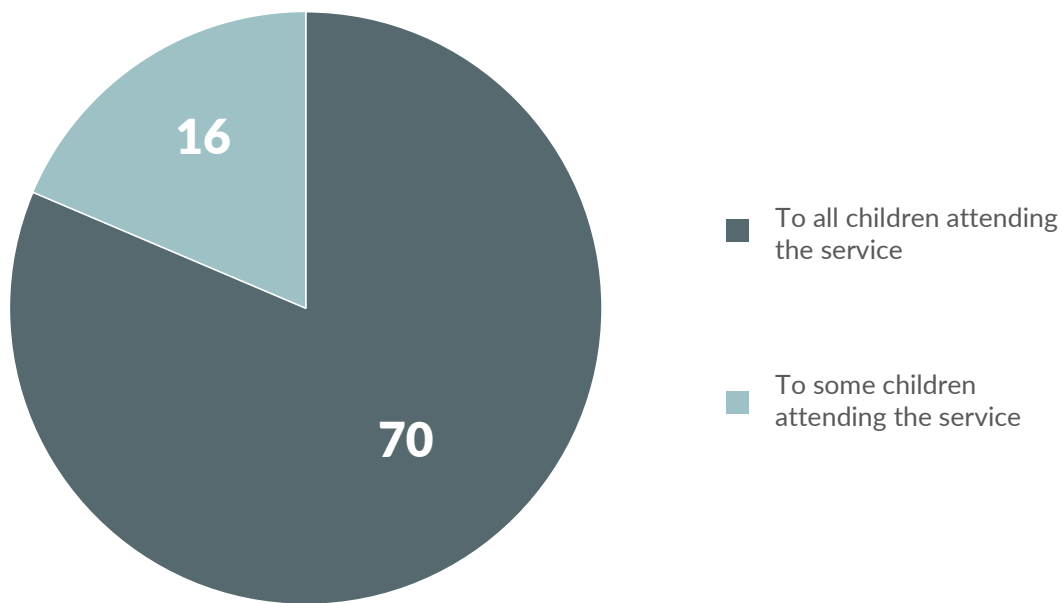
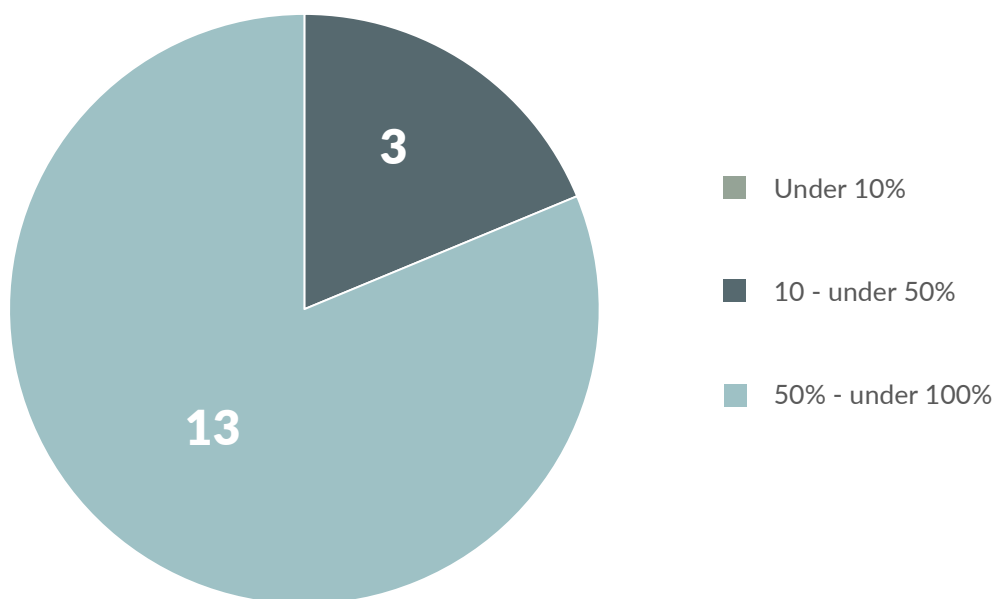


Figure 6: Age ranges of participating children

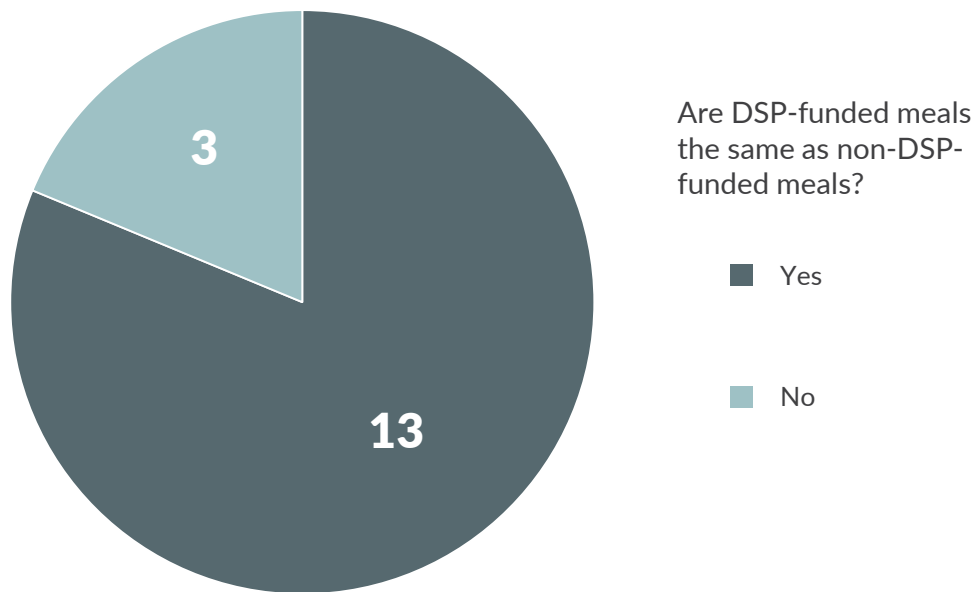
Participants were asked about the number of children receiving meals under the Department of Social Protection’s (DSP) free meals grant programme (see Figure 5). The most common response was more than 50 children (41); jointly followed by 12-23 (18) and 35-49 (18); then 24-34 (8); and 1-11 (1). When asked which age range(s) the service provides DSP-funded meals to, the most common response was 3 - under 5 years (76); followed by 5-15 years (49); followed by 0 – under 3 years (40) (see Figure 6).



**Figure 7:** Provision of DSP-funded meals



**Figure 8:** Percentage of children receiving DSP-funded meals



**Figure 9:** Similarity between DSP-funded and non-DSP-funded meals

In the majority of cases (70), the service provides DSP-funded meals to all children attending the service, while 16 participants noted that the funded meals are provided to some children attending their service (see Figure 7). Of these 16 participants, 13 stated that over 50% but less than 100% of children receive the DSP-funded meals, while three responded that between 10% and 50% of the children receive the funded meals (see Figure 8).

When asked if these children receive the same food as other children in the service not receiving the DSP-funded meals, 13 responded that they do, and three responded that they do not (see Figure 9). When asked to give more details about which groups of children receive the DSP-funded meals, these three participants clarified that there were differences in meal type between groups of children but not within groups of children. For example, one participant commented that only children aged 2-5 receive the DSP funded meals; another mentioned that all children receive the meals except for pre-school children, who “bring their own packed lunch for morning snack”; and another discussed how the meals were available for “having difficulties in second level education” who “attend an alternative full day education programme”.

The remaining 13 participants who noted that the DSP-funded meals are provided to some but not all children attending the service were also asked for more details about

which groups of children receive the DSP-funded meals. Responses included all children who meet the age criteria (7), e.g. all except pre-school children; all target group children (3) e.g. migrant, traveller and low-income income; “most children” (1); and “children referred from Tusla/PHN” (1).

## 4. Meal selection

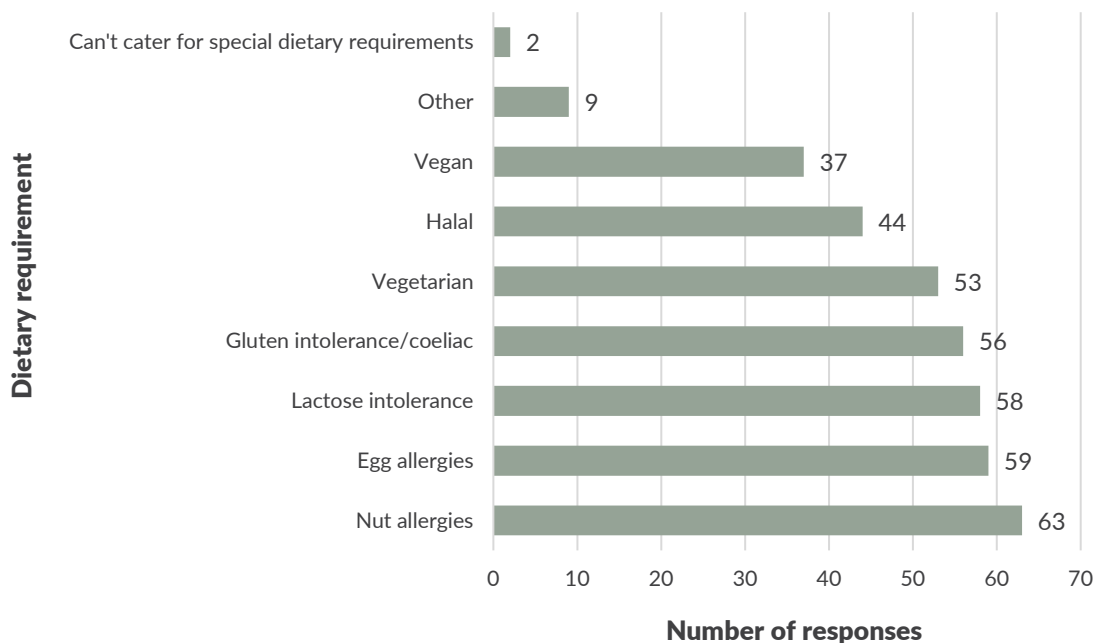


Figure 10: Dietary requirements

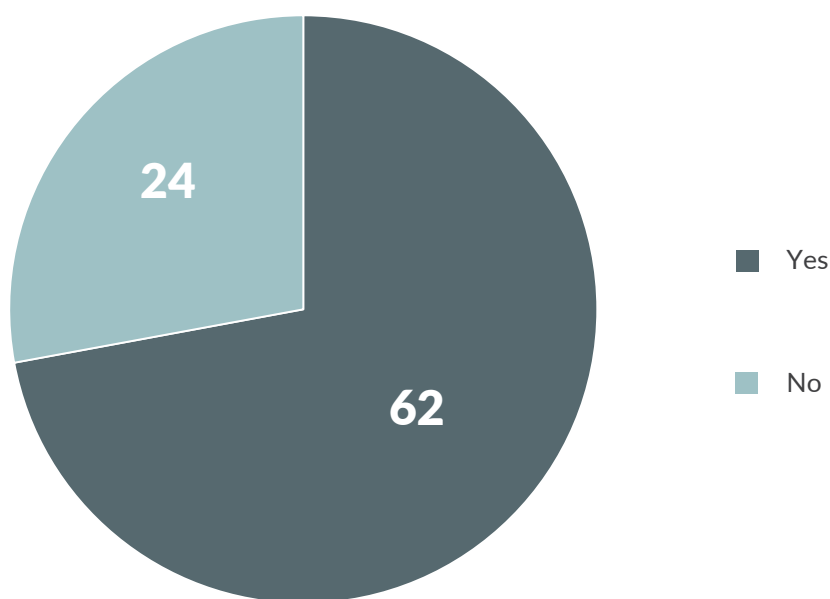


Figure 11: Involvement in meal choice

When asked which special dietary requirements the services cater for (see Figure 10), the most common response was nut allergies (63), followed by egg allergies (59); lactose intolerance (58); gluten intolerance/coeliac disease (56); vegetarian (53); halal (44); vegan (37); other (9) and cannot cater for dietary requirements (2). Other responses included “fruit allergy”; and “all allergies, medical conditions, diets, and dietary requirements”.

The majority of services responded that children are involved in choosing the food provided under the DSP-funded meals programme (62) (see Figure 11). 24 responded that the children are not involved and were asked to elaborate on their response. Responses included that the children are too young to be involved in choosing the meals; that the children need to learn to eat healthy food that they may not choose for themselves, such as vegetables; that there are too many children enrolled to allow them all to choose their own meals; that children are given some choice but do not choose the entire menu, that the menu is adapted as the children’s tastes become clearer; that food allergies and tolerances are taken into account; that children have the option of asking for an alternative meal if they do not like the meals on offer; that the menu is planned at the start of the year; that the parents choose for their children; that meal choice is based on nutritional value/healthy meal guidelines; that older children are allowed to plan their menus but not younger children; and that the service does not have sufficient funding to allow for individual meals choice.

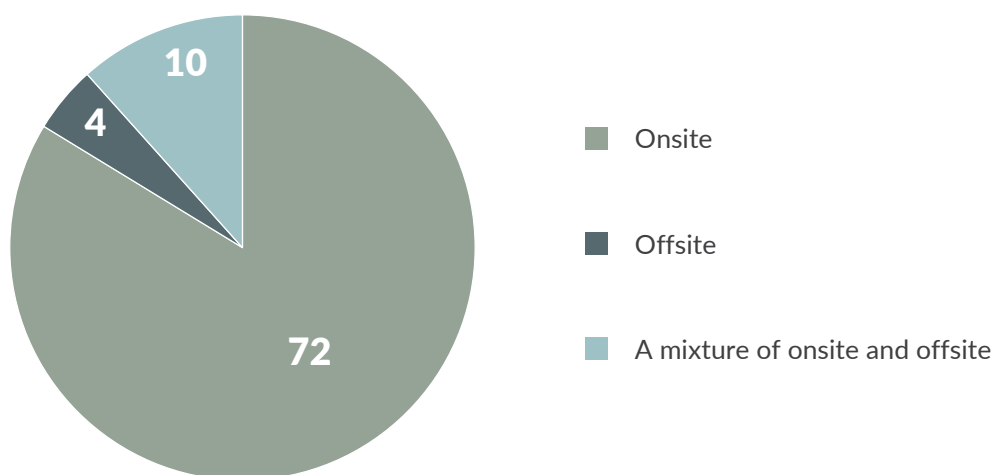
**Table 1.** Meal priorities by most common rank

Rank	Meal priorities	Number of responses
1	Meal quality	42
2	The nutritional value of the meals	25
	The cost of the meals	13
3	The suitability of the meals for special diets	18
4	The portion sizes	20
5	Ease of access to the meals	18
	Having a wide variety of meals available	17
6		
7	Ease of preparation	16
8		
9	The amount of food waste	25
10	The amount of plastic waste	42

Participants were asked to assign a ranking from 1-10 to ten different priorities that could be considered when choosing meals (see Table 1), with 1 indicating the highest priority and 10 indicating the lowest priority. The most common ranking for meal quality was rank 1 (the highest priority rank), with 42 of the 86 participants selecting rank 1 for this priority. The most common rank for both meal cost (25) and nutritional value (13) was rank 2, while the most common selection for the suitability of meals for special diets was rank 3, and the most common selection for portion size was rank 4. In the case of two different priorities - ease of access to the meals (18) and having a variety of meals available (17) - rank 5 was the most popular choice. Rank 6 and rank 8 were not selected as the most common rank for any of the ten priorities, however rank 7 was the most popular choice for ease of preparation (16). The most popular rank for the amount of food waste was rank 9, and the most common choice for the amount of plastic waste was rank 10, with 42 participants selecting this as the lowest priority when choosing meals.

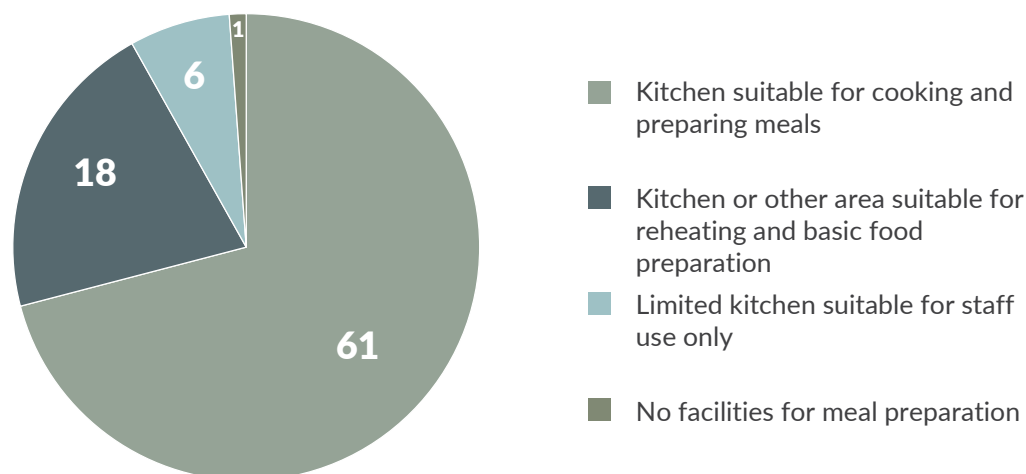
A breakdown of the ranking for each of the ten priorities can be found in Appendix 1. It is worth noting that when asked for any other feedback at the end of the survey, nine participants commented that this ranking did not accurately reflect how they would rank the ten priorities, as they would have given the same rank to a number of different priorities, and some would not have assigned rank 10 to any of the priorities.

## 5. Facilities and staff

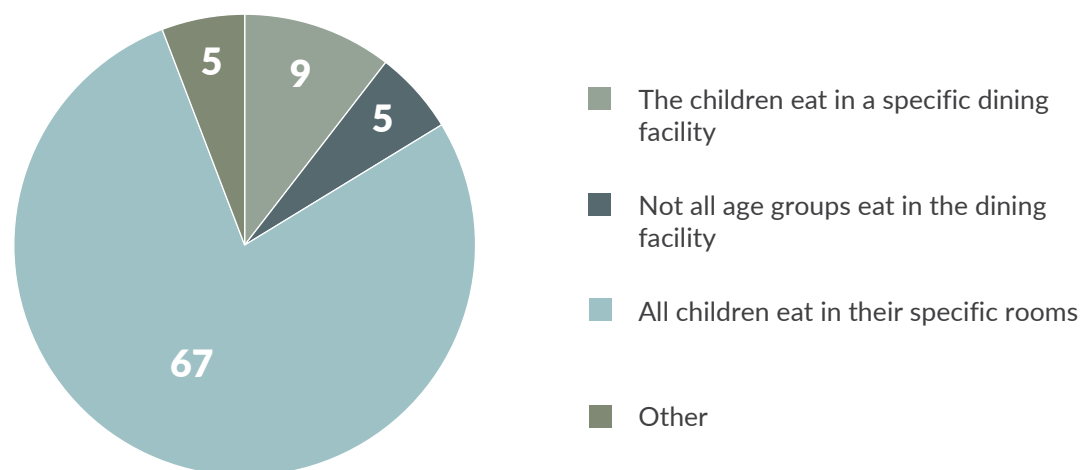


**Figure 12:** Location of meal preparation





**Figure 13:** Meal preparation facilities

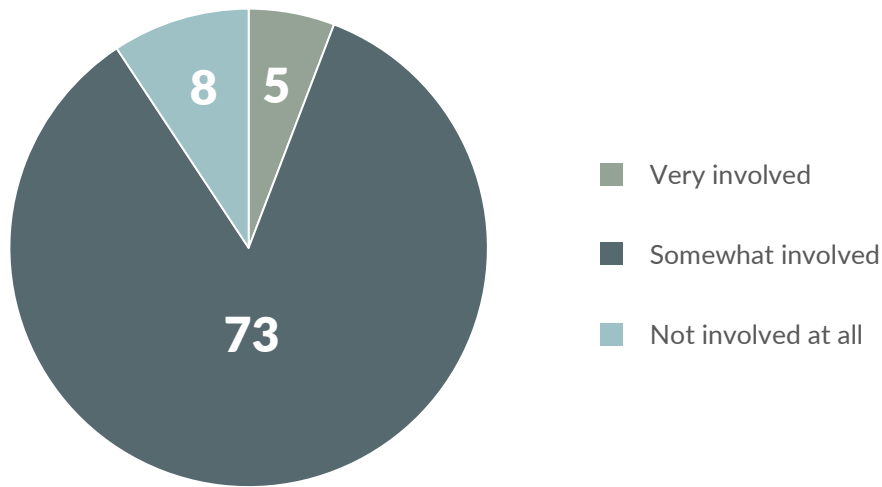


**Figure 14:** Dining location

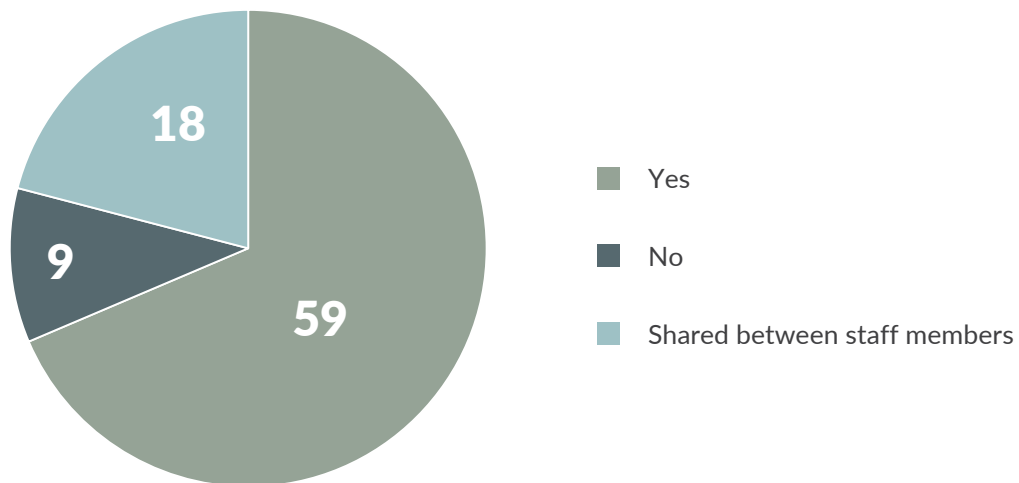
The most common location for meal preparation was onsite (72); followed by a mixture of onsite and offsite (10); and offsite (4) (see Figure 12). The most common meal preparation facility available was a kitchen suitable for cooking and preparing meals (61); followed by a kitchen or other area suitable for reheating and basic food preparation (18); limited kitchen suitable for staff use only (6), and no facilities for meal preparation (1) (see Figure 13).

When asked whether the children eat in a specific dining facility (see Figure 14), the majority of participants responded that all children eat in their specific rooms (67). The second most common answer was that the children eat in a specific dining facility (9), and the least common responses were that not all age groups eat in the dining facility (5) and other (5). Other responses included that snacks were consumed in the “main crèche”, in the “preschool room”, or “in the playroom”; and that food is

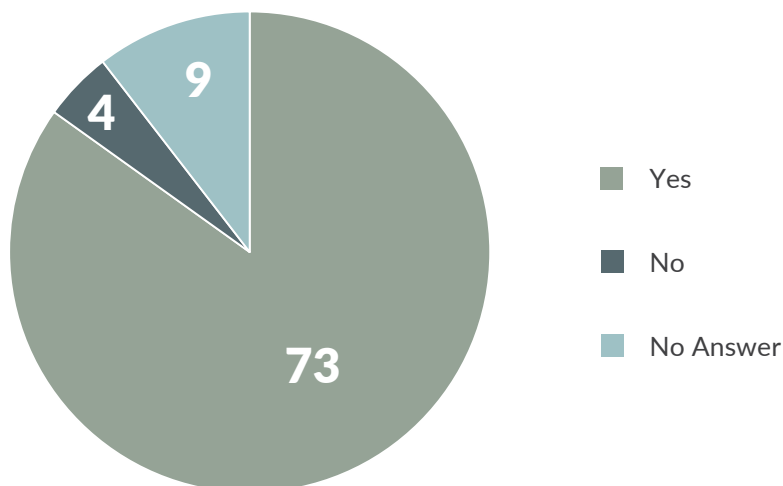
consumed in each room due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but prior to the pandemic all children ate in the main room.



**Figure 15:** Involvement of children in preparing the food and/or cleaning up



**Figure 16:** Role of staff member to prepare the meals



**Figure 17:** HACCP training among staff

The majority of participants responded that the children are involved in preparing the food and/or cleaning up after the meal (73) (see Figure 15). The second most common response was that the children are not involved at all (8); with five participants noting that the children are very involved. Those that responded that the children were not involved at all were asked to elaborate on their response. Answers included that they have access to trained staff to prepare all meals onsite; that meals are prepared offsite; that it would not be feasible to involve the children as the food is hot and prepared in large quantities; and that it would be too dangerous to allow the children to be involved.

When asked if it is a particular staff member’s role to engage in the preparation of the meals, the majority of services responded “yes” (59), followed by “shared between staff members” (18), followed by “no” (9) (see Figure 16). The majority of participants responded that these staff members have HACCP training (73), while four participants responded that they do not have HACCP training, and nine did not answer the question (see Figure 17).

## 6. Funding information

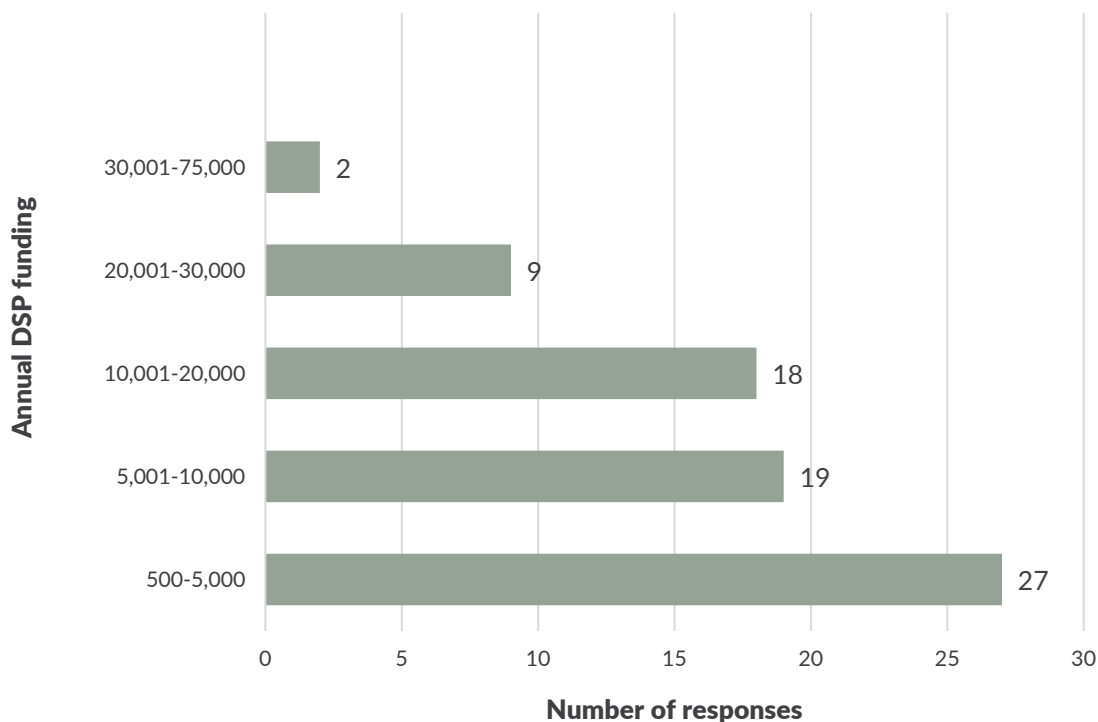
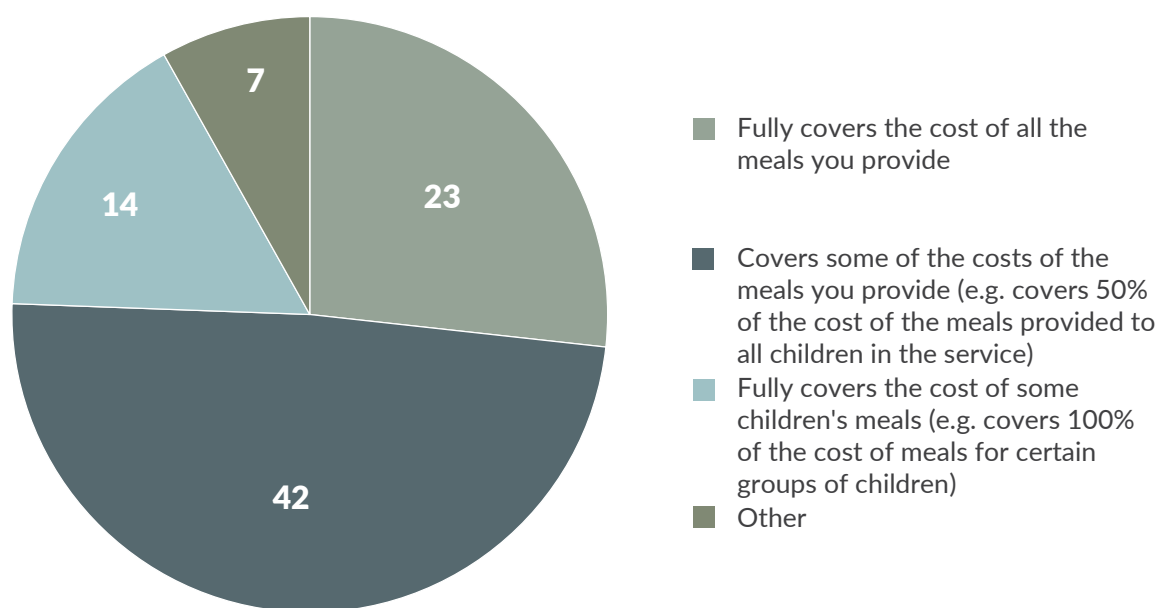


Figure 18: Annual funding received

Respondents were asked how much funding they receive per year under the meals programme (see Figure 18). While responses to this question were optional, 75 participants responded to this question. The most common response (27) was that funding in the €500-5,000 range was received per year, followed by €5001-10,000 (19); €10,001-20,000 (18); €20,001-30,000 (9) and €30,001-75,000 (2).



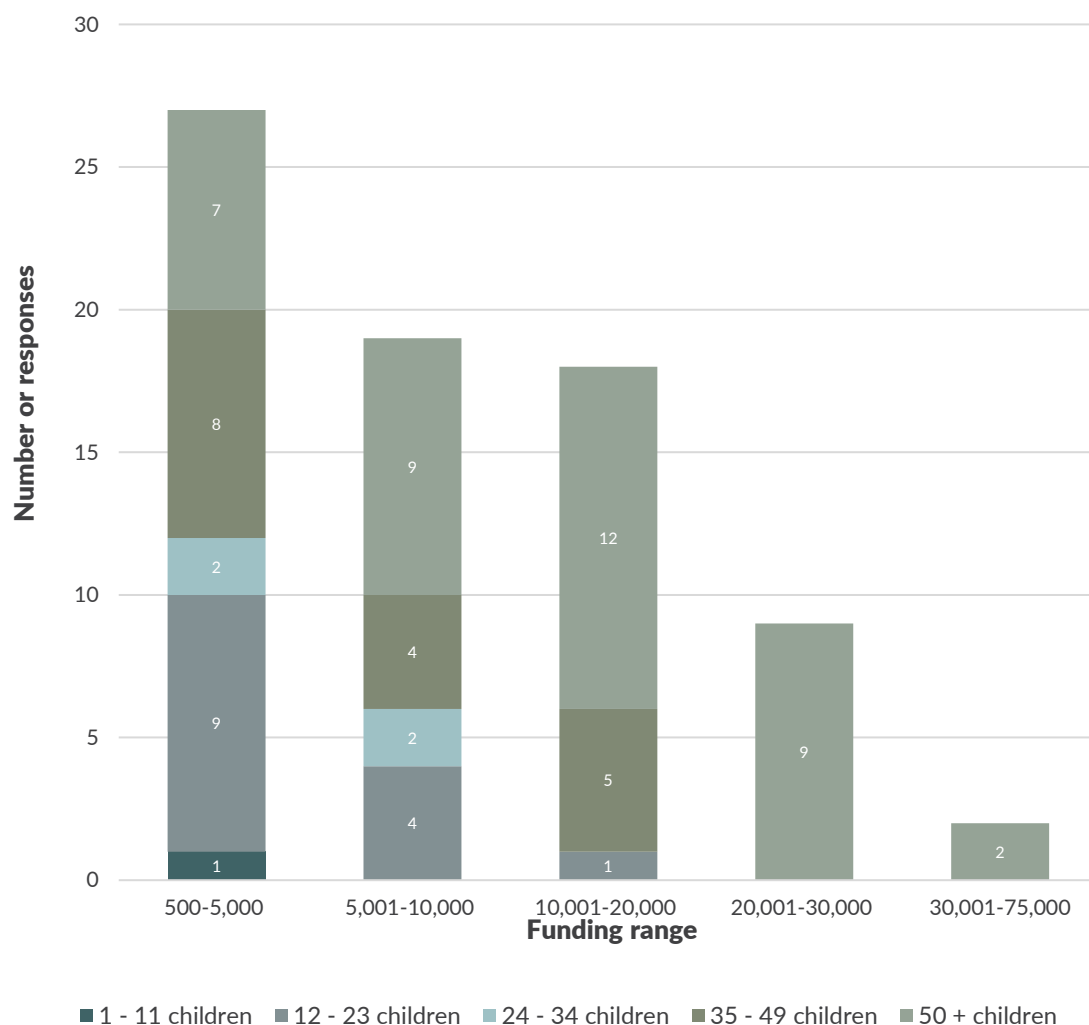
**Figure 19:** DSP funding coverage

42 participants responded that the DSP-funding covers some of the costs of the meals provided, for example 50% of the cost of the meals provided to all children in the service (see Figure 19). When asked to elaborate, the most common responses were that the funding has not kept up with inflation and no longer covers the full cost (5); and that they have to source alternative funding for food that is “not allowed to be included in the School Meals costs”, such as treats for special occasions (4). Other responses included that their “funding was reduced based on lockdown figures”; that the funding “does not cover the cost of accommodating for Halal meals”; that they are limited in what they can provide due to the lack of kitchen facilities; that the funding no longer meets the growing number of children attending the service; that the funding does not cover all expenses when buying healthy food; and that “parents have to provide their child’s lunch” when the grant runs out.

23 participants responded that the funding fully covers the costs of all meals provided. When asked to elaborate, responses included that the funding covers the cost of “food, preparation, service”; that the funding covers the costs of specific meals such as a snack, breakfast, lunch, and afterschool meals; that all meals are funded due to excess funding carried over from during the pandemic; that the funding enables them “to provide a variety of food”; that the funding fully covers the cost of the food but not the wages of those preparing the food; that they would not be able to pay for nutritious meals to disadvantaged children without the funding; and that the funding has covered all meals to date but may not be sufficient in future given the increased number of children attending the service.

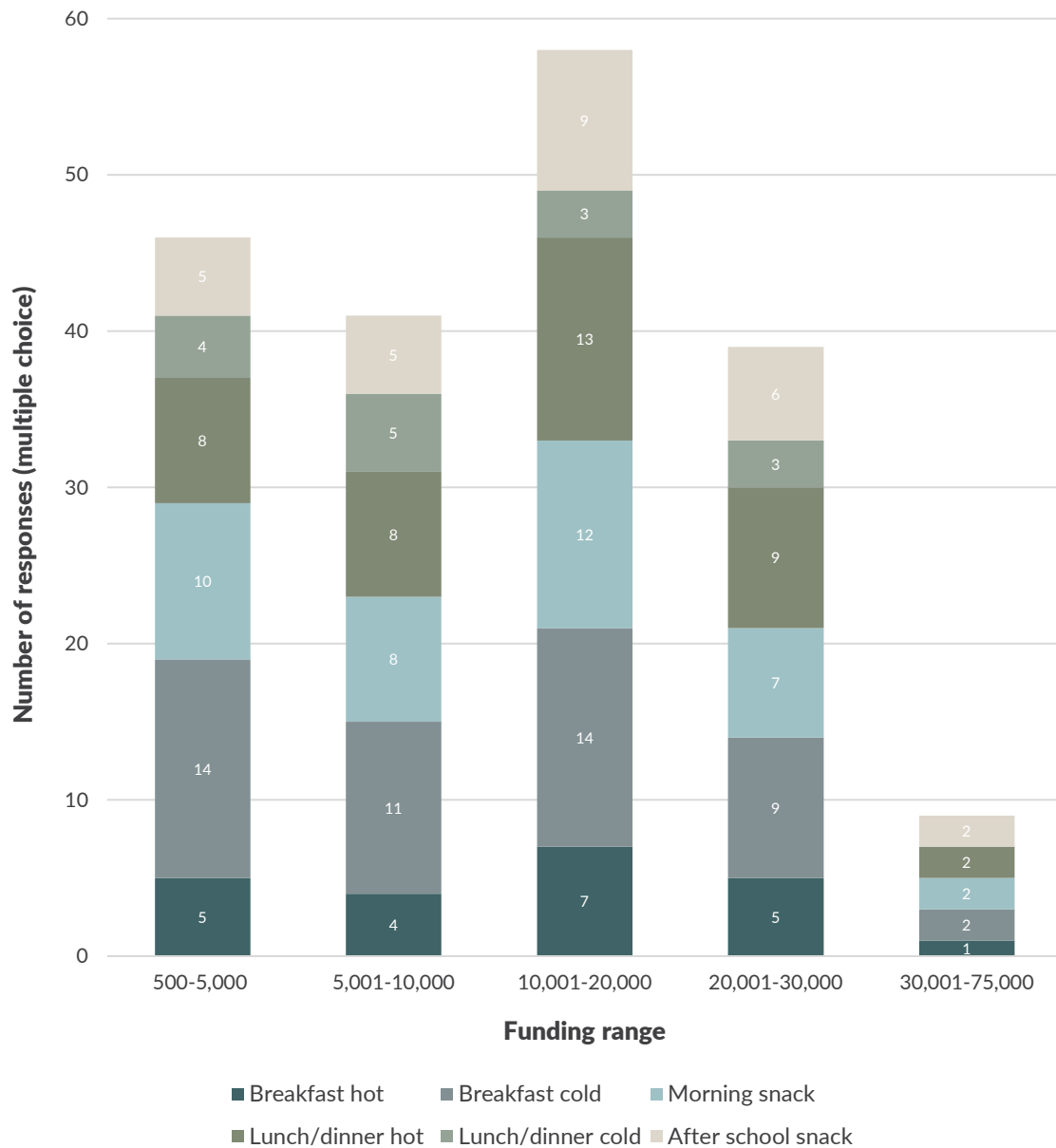
14 participants responded that the funding fully covers the cost of some children’s meals (e.g. 100% of the cost of meals for certain groups of children). When asked to elaborate, responses included that the funding covers all meals for certain groups of children but not all (such as only children over 2.5 years, only preschool children or only afterschool children, or all children except babies and toddler); that the funding covers all meals except afterschool hot meals; that the funding only covers morning snack; and that additional funding is needed depending on necessity.

Seven participants answered “other”, and when asked to elaborate, responses included that the grant does not meet the cost of each child; that the funding covers the costs of the meals provided to the group receiving meals, that the funding is only enough to cover one term; and that the funding covers “a small portion of food costs”; “80% of the costs”; “less than 50% of the costs”; or “about a third of food costs”.



**Figure 20:** Funding range by number of children

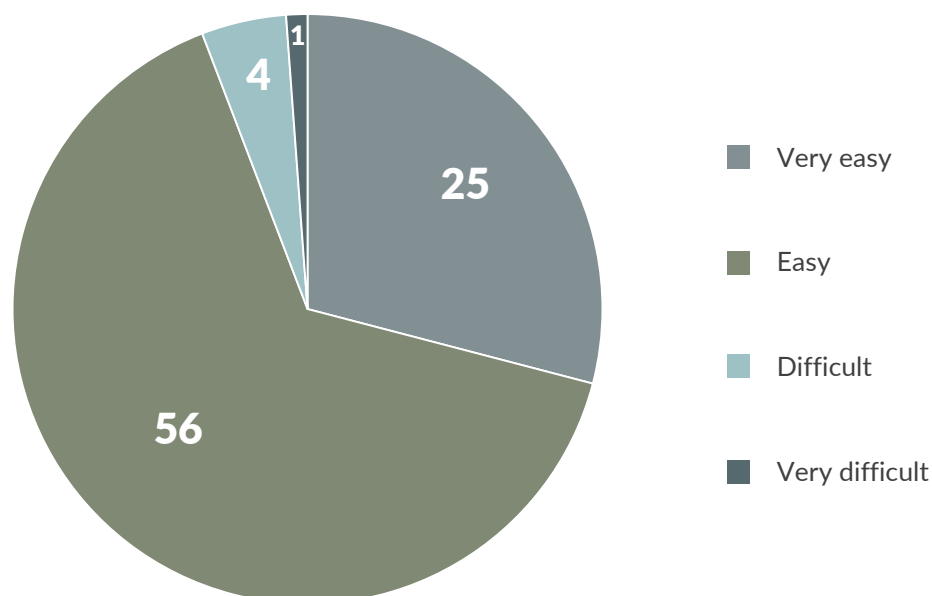
Looking at the relationship between the DSP funding received and the number of children attending the service (see Figure 20), it can be observed that all services receiving €30,001-75,000 a year or €20,001-30,000 a year had more than 50 children attending their service. This was the most common number of children for services receiving €10,001-20,000 a year and €5,001-20,000 a year (12 and 9 responses, respectively). The least common number of children attending these services was 1-11 (zero responses for both) and 20-24 children (zero responses for those receiving €10,001-20,000, and 2 responses for those receiving €5,001-20,000). The most common number of children attending services receiving €500-€5,001 a year was 12-23 (9 responses), and the least common was 1-11 children (1 response).



**Figure 21:** Funding range by meal type

While the most common meal provided overall was a hot lunch/dinner (see Figure 4), when looking at the relationship between the funding received and the meals provided (see Figure 21), cold breakfast was the most common meal provided in each funding group. In services receiving €20,001-30,000 per year, a hot lunch/dinner was just as common as a cold breakfast (both received 9 responses); and in the two services receiving €30,001-75,000 per year, all meals except hot breakfast were equally common. Hot breakfast was also the least common meal for services receiving €5,001-10,000 a year (4 responses); while cold lunch/dinner was the least

common meal for services receiving €500-5,000 a year (4 responses); €10,001-20,000 (3 responses); and €20,001-30,000 a year (3 responses).



**Figure 22:** Rating of the administration of the DSP-funded meals programme

Participants were asked to rate the overall administration of the meals programme in terms of level of difficulty (see Figure 22). Over half the participants (56) rated it as easy; followed by very easy (25); difficult (4) and very difficult (1). Those who found the administration of the programme difficult or very difficult were asked to elaborate. Responses included the impact of the reduction in funding following the Covid-19 pandemic; the difficulty involved in shopping based on meal type e.g. separating shopping costs into breakfast, lunch and dinner; the time-consuming element as it “would be easier to do online”; the difficulty involved in the 2021/22 application as it involved sending “extra documentation” which “took several days to get it submitted and payment was delayed”; and the work involved in “recording all food receipts” as the receipts “would have all the shopping for our service on it, not just food”.



## 7. Funding impact

Participants were asked to describe the impact the DSP funding has on their service. The most common response was that it enabled them to provide a range of high quality and nutritious hot meals and snacks to children from a variety of different backgrounds each day, particularly disadvantaged backgrounds (56). Many stated that this would not be possible without the funding, for example, one service provider mentioned that “after many years of shopping at discount prices and not being able to offer a varied and nutritious menu we are now able to”.

The second most common cost related to how the funding alleviates financial strain on the service provider (8), with one participant mentioning that “other funding received just about covers wages and running costs”. Other responses included that it alleviates the stress on parents by ensuring that the service provider does not have to raise their fees, and removes the need for parents to provide lunches for their children (8); that it allows service providers to cater for different cultures and dietary requirements and “meet individual needs as they arise” (5); that it promotes a sense of belonging and equality of opportunity among the children (4); and that it prevents the children from going hungry during the day (3), with one participant mentioning that “in some cases it might be the only food children receive up to home time with us”.

Three mentioned that the funding frees up their own resources to maintain and upgrade their facility, for example, by enabling them to “replace broken equipment and toys for the children”; “upgrade the play resources”; and “pay the bills”. Three participants mentioned that the funding helps the children to develop healthy eating habits and try foods that they wouldn’t normally consume, with one discussing how “when the children first come into the service some of them would tell you they don’t like brown bread or drink water but as they watch others eating and drinking these items, by the end of the first month they are doing the same as well”.

Other responses included that it gives children the opportunity to learn social skills; that it allows the service to “foster independence” in the children as they “gain skills around self-help at meal times” by “servicing and cleaning up for themselves”; that it enables the children to continue receiving a hot balanced meal each day despite the

rising cost of living; and that it allows the service to “purchase locally sourced produce”.

One respondent mention that the funding impact is “not a huge amount” as it “probably covers one term”; which was echoed by another participant who stated that they “need the funding to cover the full year”. Another participant mentioned that it helps “a little” but that they “rely on fundraising activities to make up with massive shortfall”, while another mentioned that although the funding does help “it costs quite a bit to provide the same meals to children not included in the funding”. Another commented that although they could not provide meals without the funding, the funding has stagnated for a number of years and is “having an impact with the rising costs of food”.

Participants were also asked to explain why their service offers meals under the DSP-funded meals programme. The most common response was the same as the previous question, that the programme allows them to provide high quality and well balanced nutritious meals to children from disadvantaged backgrounds who often do not receive such meals at home (54). For example, one participant noted that “the children who attend our preschool are referred to us through TUSLA Early Intervention, Social Work Departments etc. so the fact that we can provide these children with two good meals each day is crucial”.

Another common response was that it helps to alleviate the financial and time pressure on families by providing meals for their children at no additional cost (6). For example, one participant discussed how “parents could have issues with drugs or alcohol. Young parents returning to work to finish education. Some children are being raised by grandparent. If we can offer three healthy meals a day to the children it can take a little bit of pressure off the home life”.

Other common responses were also similar to the previous question: that it alleviates financial pressure on the services, which operate on a non-profit basis, and frees up funding for other necessary spending (6); that it allows them to provide a more equitable service to all children (4); that it helps the children to develop healthy eating habits and puts the services in a position where they can “talk to the children about nutrition and health” (4); that it helps to alleviate hunger and malnourishment in

children (3); that the children enjoy the social aspect of the meal times (2); that it helps the children to try new foods; and because they feel that meal provision is necessary for a full day service (3).

## 8. Recommendations for future schemes

When asked for suggestions regarding how to improve the scheme going forward, the most common responses related to the funding quantity and the coverage of the meals programme. Nine participants recommended making meals available for all children attending early year's services, particularly younger children. Eight suggested revising the funding caps currently in place, taking inflation and the associated "rising costs of providing this service" into account, and considering the "cost of food and electricity going forward". Five recommended making the scheme "more widely available to all community-based services", with one commenting that "ELC and SAC services in DEIS locations do not all get school meals funding".

Four participants suggested reviewing "the amount of children attending the service periodically" as many of the services have grown in scale and now have capacity for more children than the number they receive funding for. Three recommended making the funding available for different types of meals, such as breakfast and dinner. Three recommended an increase in funding to allow services without kitchens to purchase hot meals and a wider variety of nutritious food. Three called for an increase in funding to cover the wage costs involved in food provision, with one commenting that they produce the food onsite as "the current scheme only allows for the purchase of foodstuffs", and that they "have to receive funding through other supports" to cover the staff costs involved. Six suggested an increase in funding in general but did not elaborate further.

A number of responses also related to the application process and the time associated with applying for the funding. Five recommended setting up an online application process to make the process quicker and easier by reducing the amount of paperwork involved. Four participants recommended streamlining the application process to make it less time consuming, with one elaborating that a different form needs to be completed for each service they run, which involves a lot of repetition as

the “aims and objectives are the same for each”; and the other commenting that one form should be required “for all types of meals requiring funding”. Another participant mentioned the timing of the funding, as the first payment is received in December but the school year begins at the start of September. One participant recommended sending an email to service providers to confirm that their documentation has been received; and another suggested sending reminders of the application deadline “nearer the time to claim” so they don’t miss the deadline.

Other recommendations included reviewing the scheme periodically to account for “wastage of food in larger schools”. Two mentioned allocating a small budget for treats for celebrations such as birthdays; and two recommended making it easier to record receipts as their shopping includes food that is “not acceptable for funding”, which makes “shopping a bit more difficult trying to get different receipts”.

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Research & Evaluation Unit | July 2022



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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Ranking of the ten meal priorities

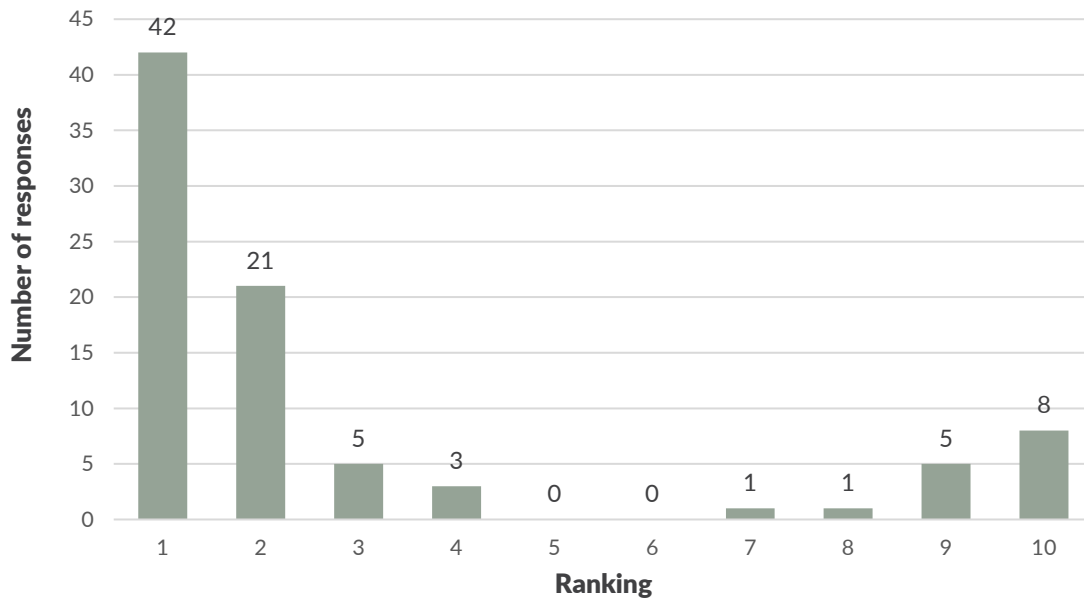


Figure 23: Meal quality

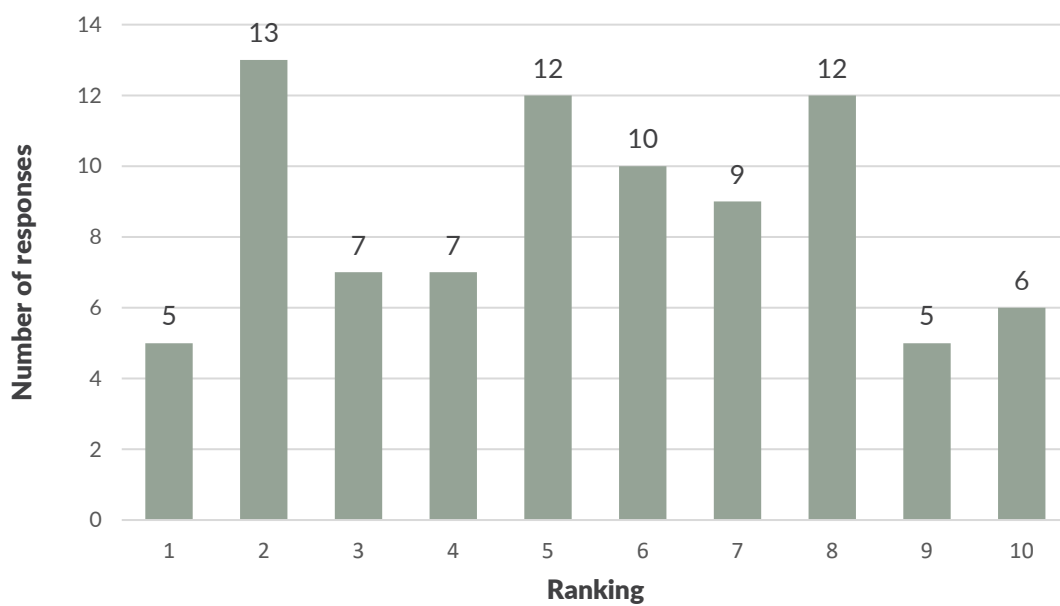


Figure 24: Meal cost

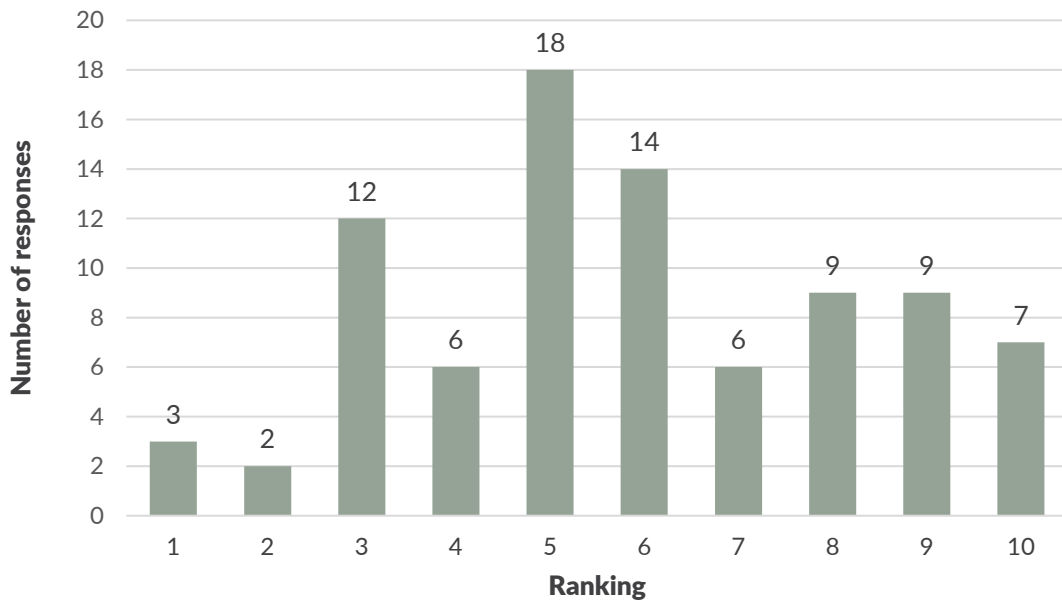


Figure 25: Ease of access to meals

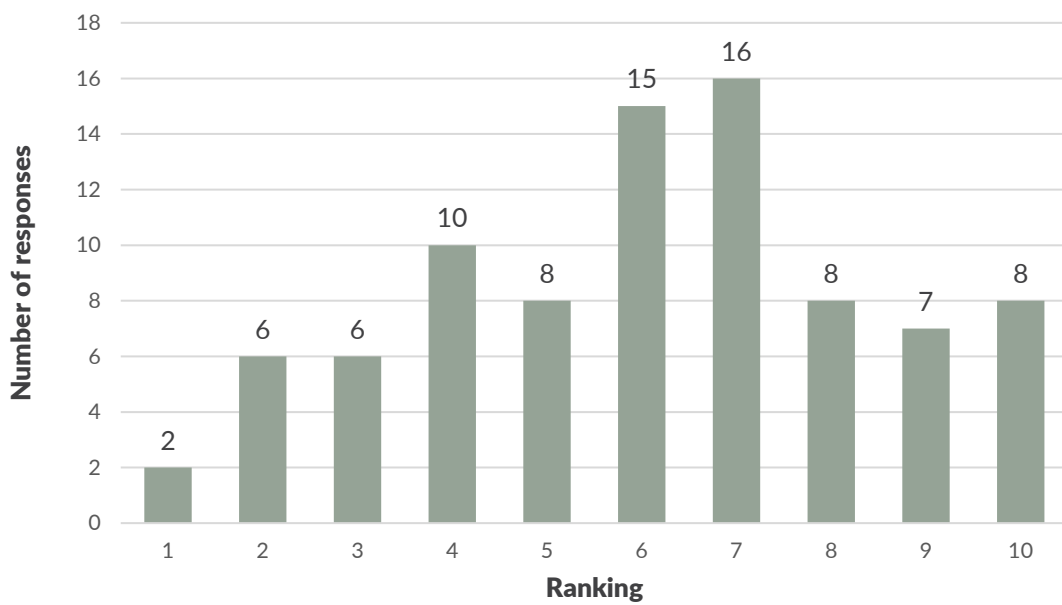


Figure 26: Ease of preparation

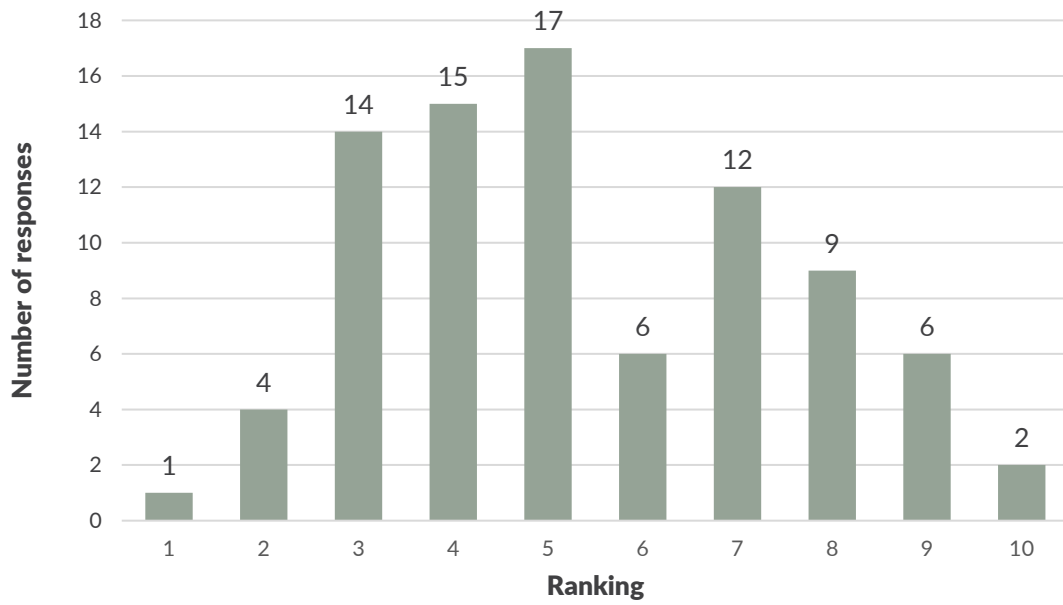


Figure 27: Having a wide variety of meals available

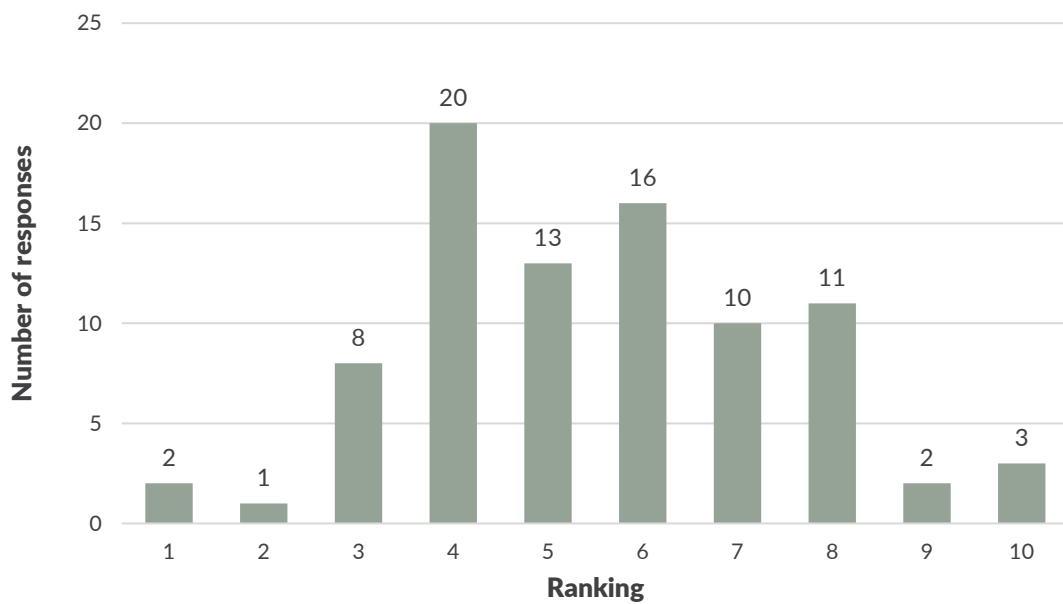
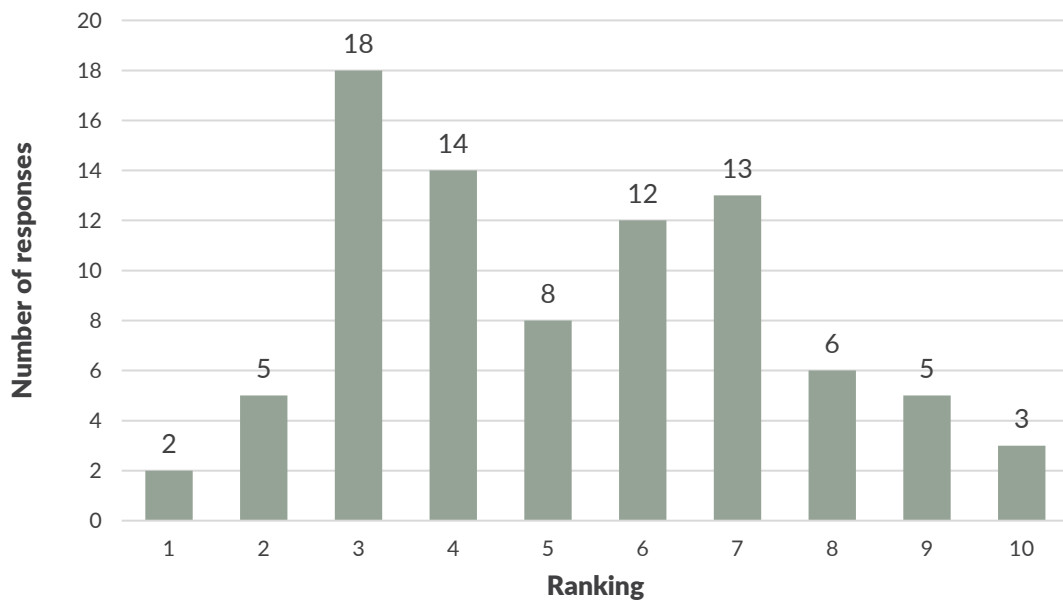
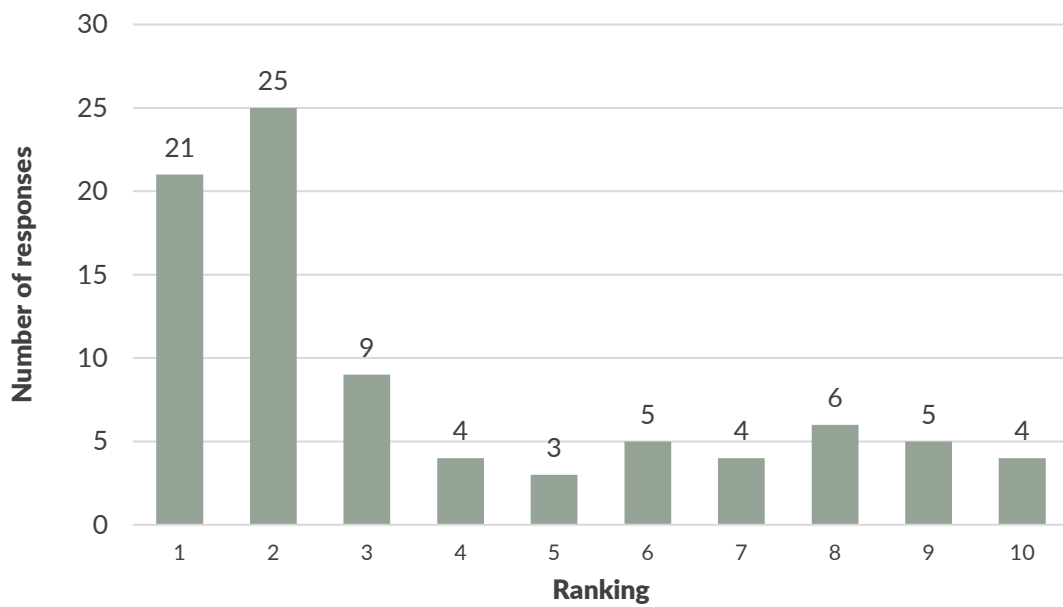


Figure 28: Portion sizes

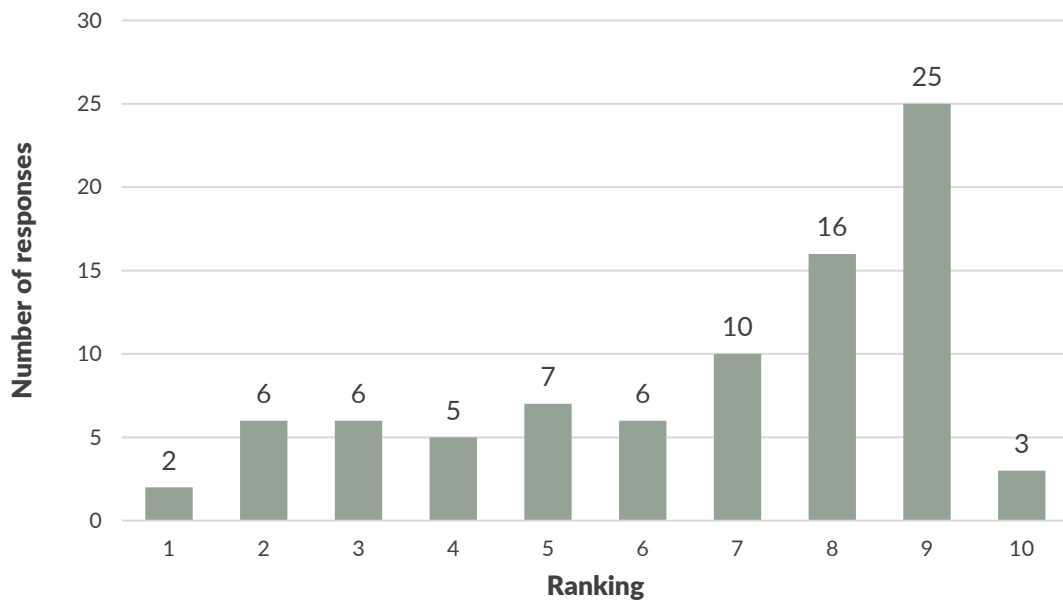


**Figure 29:** The suitability of meals for special diets

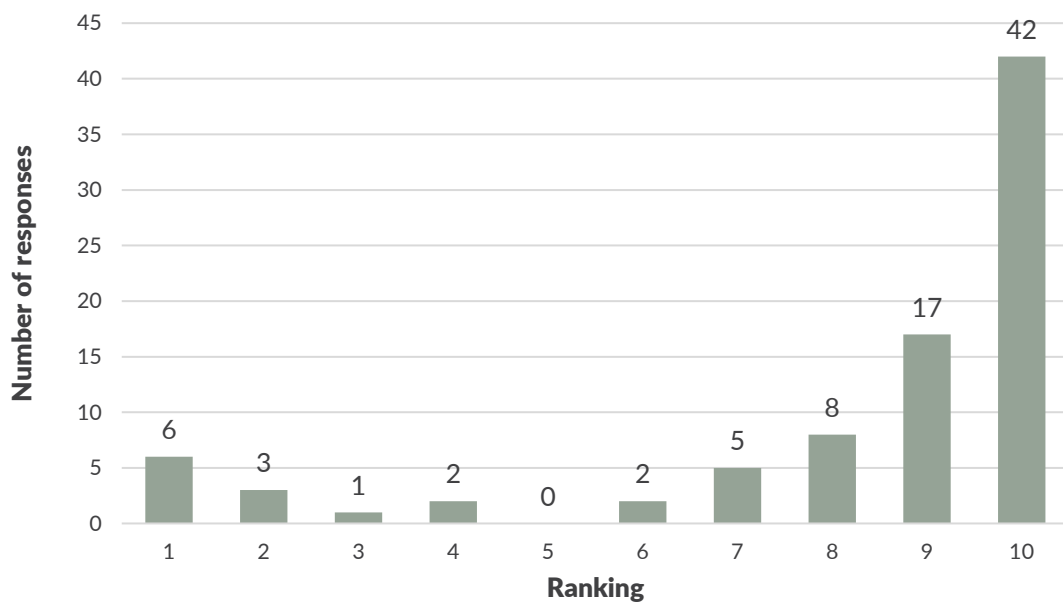


**Figure 30:** The nutritional value of the meals





**Figure 31:** The amount of food waste



**Figure 32:** The amount of plastic waste

## Appendix 2: Survey questions

# Survey on the provision of meals in early learning and care and school age childcare

Fields marked with \* are mandatory.

First 5 is the whole-of-Government strategy to improve the lives of babies, young children and their families. It is a ten-year plan to help make sure all children have positive early experiences and get a great start in life.

As part of this strategy, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) is in the process of developing policy on the provision of meals in early learning and care and school age childcare. In order for this work to be informed by current practice, we are asking for assistance from those services currently getting 'Meals Grants' from the Department of Social Protection (DSP).

This survey seeks information on the provision of DSP-funded meals in early learning and care and school age childcare settings, to inform policy in this area. Please note that the information you share will only be used for the purpose of the informing the policy development in the DCEDIY, and will not be shared with any other Government Department or Agency.

**\* 1. Which of the following does your service fall under:**

- Community (not for profit)
- Private

**\* 2. Which of the following services do you offer (multiple choice allowed):**

- ECCE sessional
- Full Day Care
- Part time care
- School Age Childcare
- Sessional under 3s
- Other

**\* 3. Where is your service located?**

- Carlow
- Cavan
- Clare
- Cork
- Donegal
- Dublin
- Galway
- Kerry
- Kildare
- Kilkenny
- Laois
- Leitrim
- Limerick
- Longford
- Louth
- Mayo
- Meath
- Monaghan
- Offaly
- Roscommon
- Sligo
- Tipperary
- Waterford
- Westmeath
- Wexford
- Wicklow

**4. How much funding do you receive per year under the Department of Social Protection (DSP) freemeals grant programme? (optional question)**

*1000 character(s) maximum*

**\* 5. What age range(s) does your service provide the DSP-funded meals to (multiple choice allowed)**

- 0 - under 3
- 3 - under 5 years
- 5 - 15 years

**\* 6. How many children are currently accessing the DSP-funded meals?:**

- 1 - 11
- 12 - 23
- 24 – 34
- 35 - 49
- 50 +

**\* 7. How long has your service offered DSP-funded meals?:**

- Less than 1 year
- 1-5 years
- 6 years or more

**\* 8. Which of the following DSP-funded meals are offered? (multiple choice allowed):**

- Breakfast hot
- Breakfast cold
- Morning snack
- Lunch/dinner hot
- Lunch/dinner cold
- After school snack
- Other

**\* 9. Are the DSP-funded meals prepared:**

- Onsite
- Offsite
- A mixture of onsite and offsite

**\* 10. What kind of meal preparation facilities are available in your service?**

- Kitchen suitable for cooking and preparing meals
- Kitchen or other area suitable for reheating and basic food preparation
- Limited kitchen suitable for staff use only
- No facilities for meal preparation
- Other

**\* 11. Do the children eat in a specific dining facility?**

- Yes
- Some, not all age groups eat in the dining facility
- No, all children eat in their specific rooms
- Other

**\* 12. Do the DSP-funded meals cater for any of the following food allergies/intolerances and dietary requirements/preferences? (multiple choice allowed):**

- Gluten intolerance/coeliac
- Lactose intolerance
- Nut allergies
- Egg allergies
- Vegetarian
- Vegan
- Halal
- Other
- Can't cater for special dietary requirements

**\* 13. Are the children involved in choosing the food provided under the DSP-funded meals programme?**

- Yes
- No

**\* 14. Are the children involved in preparing the food and/or cleaning up after the meal?**

- Very involved
- Somewhat involved
- Not involved at all

**\* 15. Is it a particular staff member's role to engage in the preparation of the meals?**

- Yes
- No
- Shared between staff members

**\* 16. The DSP-funded meals are provided:**

- To all children attending the service
- To some children attending the service
- Other

**\* 17. The funding from the DSP:**

- Fully covers the cost of all the meals you provide
- Covers some of the costs of the meals you provide (e.g. covers 50% of the cost of the meals provided to all children in the service)
- Fully covers the cost of some children's meals (e.g. covers 100% of the cost of meals for certain groups of children)
- Other

**\* 18. What impact does the DSP funding have on your service?**

*1000 character(s) maximum*

**19. Thinking of the provision of meals in your service, please rank the following in order of priority(1 meaning highest priority and 10 meaning lowest priority)**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
* The quality of the meals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* The cost of the meals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Ease of access to the meals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Ease of preparation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Having a wide variety of meals available	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* The portion sizes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* The suitability of the meals for special diets	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* The nutritional value of the meals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* The amount of food waste	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* The amount of plastic waste	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**20. Do you feel that the overall administration of the DSP-funded meals programme (e.g. funding application, delivery of funding, communication with the Department of Social Protection) is:**

- Very easy
- Easy
- Difficult
- Very difficult

**\* 21. Please explain why your service offers meals under the DSP-funded meals programme**

*1000 character(s) maximum*



**\* 22. Do you have any suggestions for how to improve this scheme going forward?**

*1000 character(s) maximum*

**23. We may have some further questions, if you are happy for us to contact you or if you would be willing to participate in a potential focus group on this topic, please provide the following details below:**

1. E-mail address
2. Name of the service you work for

*1000 character(s) maximum*

**\* 24. Thank you for participating in this survey. If you have any questions, you can email the DCEDIY Research and Evaluation Unit Statistics Team at [statistics@equality.gov.ie](mailto:statistics@equality.gov.ie)**

Please let us know in the text box below if there were any questions that were difficult to understand, and/or if you have any suggestions for improvements to the questions (e.g. was there anything additional related to this topic that you feel we should have asked about?)

**Contact**

[Contact Form](#)



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