



GENIUS

SCHOOL

FOOD

NETWORK

**GENERATING
EXCELLENT
NUTRITION IN
UK SCHOOLS**

SUMMARY REPORT



**GENIUS
School
Food
Network**

THE NETWORK

THE SYSTEM

THE PRIORITIES

THE PANDEMIC

THE IMPACT

**GENERATING
EXCELLENT
NUTRITION IN
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Suggested citation

O’Kane N, Schliemann D, Woodside J, on behalf of the GENIUS Network (2024) “Generating Excellent Nutrition in UK Schools: Summary Report” Available at: <https://geniusschoolfoodnetwork.com/GENIUSOutputs/>
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About

Funded by the UK Prevention Research Partnership to explore opportunities for intervention and innovation in the UK School Food System, the GENIUS network aimed to bring together key stakeholders with the aim of working towards a more health promoting food and nutrition system in UK schools.



Members

Membership included academic researchers active in school food research across a range of disciplines, alongside major non-academic stakeholders in school food, as well as local government, policy development and public health bodies.

Objectives

1. To build the network, facilitate new interactions, and build research capacity regionally and UK-wide
2. To better understand the current school food system, by collecting data using the network and innovative research methodologies
3. To sustain the network and drive impact through identification of areas of best practice, and co-production of key priorities in research

This report

This report aims to summarise all of the key findings and outputs from the GENIUS School Food Network. These findings have been summarised under the following headings: the network, the system, the priorities, the pandemic, and the impact; to reflect the various aspects of the project.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the funders of the network, UK Prevention Research Partnership. We would also like to whole heartedly thank every member of the GENIUS School Food Network for contributing to the work outlined in this report, and to the many stakeholders who supported the research.

Contact

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THE NETWORK

WHAT WE KNOW

Social networking methods can be used to visualise networks, and interactions within networks. We wanted to visualise the interactions and engagements among co-investigators of the GENIUS network, to provide indication of success of the network in forming new relationships and collaborations within school food.

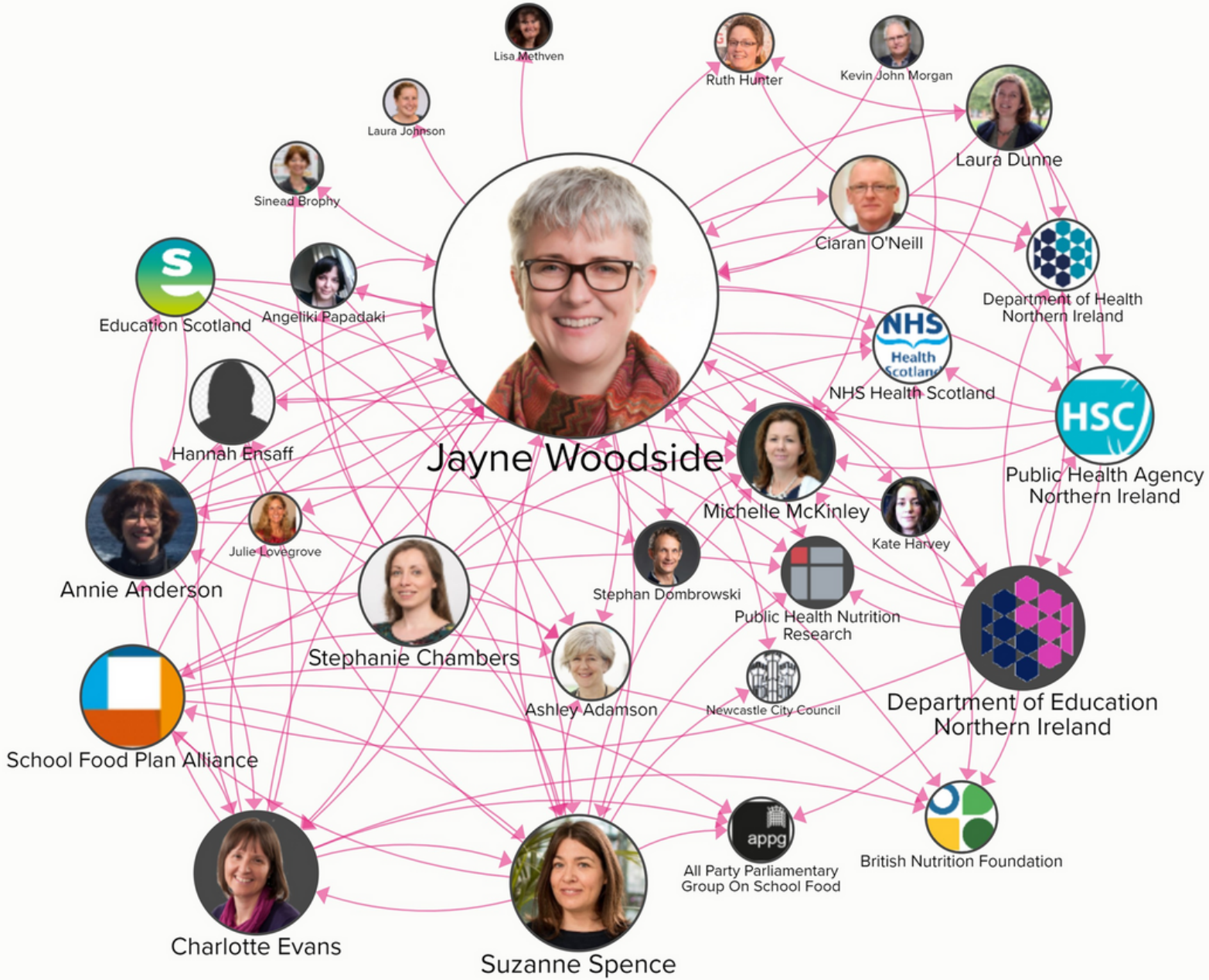
WHAT WE DID

We disseminated an online survey among named co-investigators from the original GENIUS proposal.

.Participants were asked to identify which other named co-investigators they engage with, and estimate how long they have had a working relationship with regards school food. We then mapped this network and summarised duration of relationships.

WHAT WE FOUND

Flip overleaf to view the network. We found that 50.4% of all relationships identified were formed within the timeline of the GENIUS project (<5 years) indicating success of the network in forming new relationships and collaborations in school food.



Each element/circle is a named co-I
 Arrows/connections indicate relationship
 Size of image determined by degree (i.e., number of connections)



MAPPING THE SCHOOL FOOD SYSTEM

WHAT WE KNOW

Whole-school approaches are recommended in literature, however, the complexity of the school system can create difficulty in successfully implementing these approaches. This study aimed to apply a systems lens to the secondary school food system, to understand what factors are driving food choice.

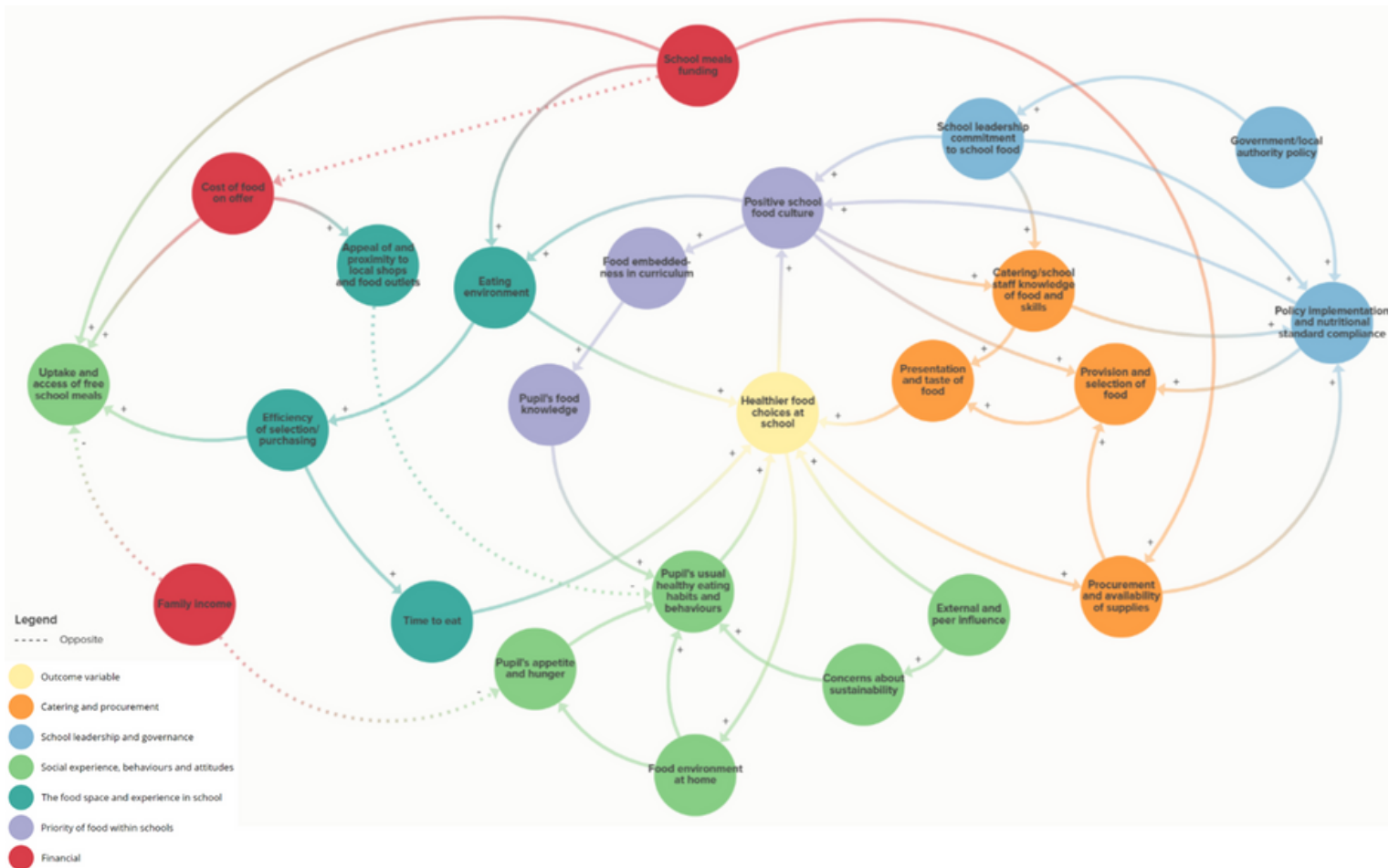
WHAT WE DID

Participatory methods were used with a range of school stakeholders to co-produce a systems map of factors driving food choice in the secondary school food system.

An online survey was used to gather an initial list of factors, and a group model building workshop was conducted to establish relationships between these factors. Two school workshops captured views of students and their feedback on the map. The map then underwent final refinement by the research team and all stakeholders were offered the opportunity to provide feedback on the final version.

WHAT WE FOUND

Flip overleaf to view the systems map developed, which contained 24 factors with 43 relationships between them.





THE PRIORITIES

WHAT WE KNOW

It is important to understand the evidence gaps in school food research to allow the development and implementation of policies to support children to eat healthily at school throughout the UK.

WHAT WE DID

Conduct a priority setting exercise to co-produce the Top 10 key priorities in terms of research questions, following a process informed by the James Lind Alliance.

We followed a 7-step process, including two large-scale online surveys with stakeholders across the UK and an online workshop. We captured a range of stakeholders from different backgrounds and regions. At the end of the process we identified the top 18 priorities.

WHAT WE FOUND

Flip overleaf to see the top 10 research priorities for school food, identified by a range of stakeholders

TOP 10 RESEARCH PRIORITIES FOR SCHOOL FOOD

1 What is the value to pupils' health and well-being of a UFSM vs means-tested FSM policies, which may have different criteria for eligibility?

How can we improve uptake of FSM for those who are eligible?

2

3 What are the facilitators and challenges for decision-makers to engage with and prioritise school food?

How can school food systems deliver school meals to pupils while keeping within the school food standards, procurement requirements and budgets?

4

5 How do we implement changes to FSM policies (e.g. extended or UFSM) to achieve optimal participation and benefits?

How do school food policies and interventions impact on and address inequalities in pupils from different sub-groups?

6

7 How can policies create a positive food culture and affect pupils' relationships with food?

How do we overcome the challenges that schools have in implementing an optimal eating environment?

8

9 What innovative approaches can be used help drive uptake of healthy food consumption in schools?

What is the impact of food consumed at school on pupils and to what extent can it reduce inequalities?

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THE PANDEMIC

WHAT WE KNOW

The Covid-19 pandemic caused school closures all over the UK, having detrimental impacts on young people's lives, especially schooling. School closures and phased returns with varying levels of restrictions caused major changes to the provision of food in schools.

WHAT WE DID

We surveyed stakeholders who work in the school food provision on changes to school food with the aim to understand the implications of these. This was an online survey consisting of 23 questions, both open-ended and multiple-choice.





WHAT WE FOUND

The Covid-19 pandemic affected children's eating habits due to a change in routine e.g. due to being home-schooled or a change to eating times in schools and classroom bubbles.

The variety of foods available was reduced as direct response to the Covid-19 restrictions in schools. Many adaptations due to the Covid-19 pandemic caused changes to working practices, such as kitchen bubbles, and kitchen operations, e.g. increased cleaning and staff-pupil interactions



The classroom bubbling system changed where children and staff ate in schools, which meant that social interactions changed. The various changes also impact staff working in schools, leading to stress and anxiety. Positives were that schools and regions provided various forms of support for pupils, e.g. through voucher schemes. Teamwork and communication amongst staff in and out of schools improved.



THE STAKEHOLDER SURVEY

WHAT WE KNOW

In the UK, there are laws in place for the types of foods and drinks allowed to be served in primary schools. However, the laws between the four nations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) can be very different. Public health scientists know that, due to a range of challenges, schools can find applying the laws difficult.

WHAT WE DID

In order to understand the challenges better, we sent online surveys to school staff, parents and pupils to find out what they thought of the primary school food system.

We asked questions such as, what works well, what does not work well, and what would an ideal school food system look like. Most responses to the survey were from parents, and those living in England and Scotland returned the greatest number of surveys.

WHAT WE FOUND

Parents were keen for children to have access to freshly cooked, healthy food and plenty of choice with fruit and vegetable options. They would like easy ways to see lunch menus in advance with options for children to be able to mix and match foods. Portions served to children were sometimes felt to be too small and not age appropriate.



THE IMPACT

PUMP PRIMING

GENIUS provided pump-priming to a series of small-scale research projects. An independent panel reviewed against set criteria, and four projects were awarded funding (a total of £29K, with approximately £7k per project).

1. ULSTER UNIVERSITY

Effectiveness of a peer-led school based intervention to promote healthy food choices in adolescents: a pilot feasibility study



2. UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON

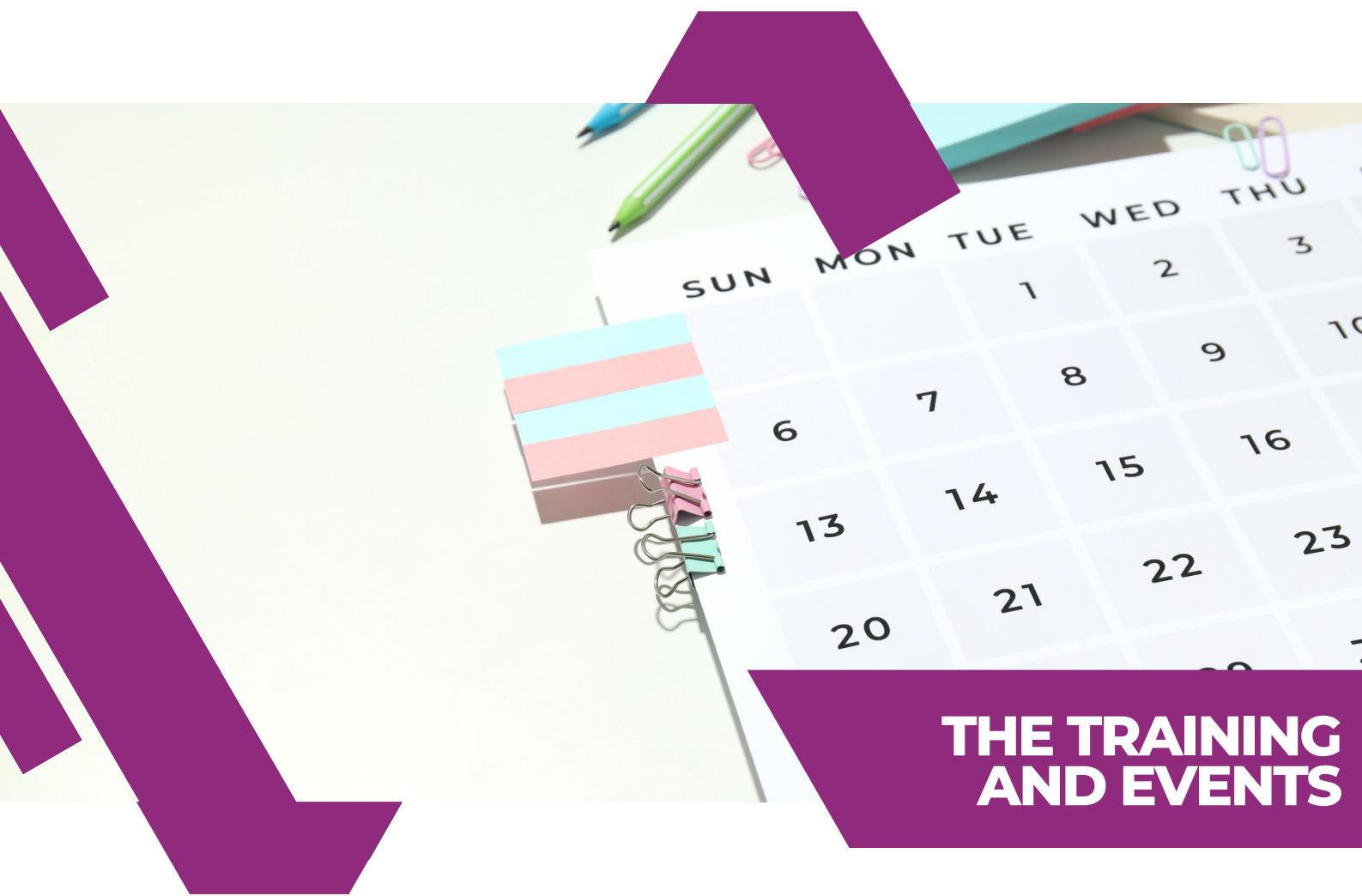
Secondary school food policy approaches across the UK

3. UNIVERSITY OF DUNDEE

An assessment of the role of Parental Networks on uptake of school meals

4. UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Acceptability and feasibility of choice architecture to promote healthy dietary choices in secondary school canteens: a qualitative study with catering staff



THE TRAINING AND EVENTS

GENIUS TRAINING

A number of training opportunities were provided to members. Prof Mike Clarke (Queen's University Belfast) provided training on accelerating impact: maximising the usefulness of research evidence for members. This was held in Sept 2021 and the recording is [available online](#). Prof Ruth Hunter and Dr Leandro Garcia (Queen's University Belfast) hosted a Systems Mapping Event where they provided an introduction to systems thinking and complexity science for food in schools. This was held in Nov 2021 and the recording is [available online](#).

EVENTS AND DISSEMINATION

Members from GENIUS were invited to speak at a number of conferences, including a regional conference for teachers. Findings from projects conducted within the GENIUS Network have been presented at numerous academic conferences, including the UK Congress on Obesity and Nutrition Society meetings. Outputs from the network are ongoing with numerous manuscripts submitted and in progress. These outputs will be shared on the website when available.



THE COMMUNICATIONS

MAILING LIST

The mailing list for GENIUS, at time of writing, has over 290 members. Individuals on the mailing list receive regular updates, news, and requests from other members, and have the opportunity to share their own news, research, and any other opportunities they would like to share. You can join the active mailing list by [subscribing online](#).

SOCIAL MEDIA

The GENIUS Network has an active social media presence, on Twitter/X - [@GeniusSFN](#). The platform serves

the purpose of sharing and amplifying news and opportunities shared with the account from members and other individuals who would like to amplify their message. You can follow along for updates and share with us anything you'd like reshared.

WEBSITE

[Our website](#) is active and provides a hub for information on the network, a medium for subscribing to our mailing list, and for updating with news. Ongoing outputs will be shared on the website and social media when available.



THE FEEDBACK

MEMBER FEEDBACK

An online survey was circulated among GENIUS members, which gathered 39 responses. Members were asked to consider whether they believed the network helped them to develop new relationships or collaborations in the area of school food, and were asked to identify the most useful opportunities they benefitted from.

 **68.4%** of members

believed the network helped them to develop new relationships or collaborations in the area of school food

THE MOST USEFUL OPPORTUNITIES

as identified by members were:

- 1) Interacting and networking with individuals in roles and institutions similar to and different from their own; and,
- 2) Accessing new resources, information, knowledge, expertise and training



THE ONGOING ACTIVITIES

SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS

Whilst the official funding period of GENIUS has now ceased, the connections made through the network will continue on in a number of different ways. Firstly, the GENIUS mailing list, social media, and website will remain live and act as a medium through which members can share news and get in touch with each other. Secondly, two special interest groups have been established, which members can join and attend meetings to continue discussions and plans made within the GENIUS network.

UKSBM: CHILDREN'S HEALTH

[Learn more](#) on the website
To join: Contact Dr Miranda Pallan (University of Birmingham)
m.j.pallan@bham.ac.uk

NUTRITION SOCIETY: SCHOOL FOOD SYSTEMS

[Learn more](#) on the website
To join: Contact Dr Suzanne Spence (Newcastle University)
suzanne.spence@newcastle.ac.uk

Glossary of terms

School Food system

This includes everything related to food in schools. Examples of this include foods available across the whole school day, school food policies, sustainability concerns, procurement, school gardens, food provided at school events, food education in the classroom and activities that integrate with food education, food culture and the environment. It also includes all school food stakeholders (e.g. Caterers, suppliers, pupils, teachers, teaching assistants, principals, local government, governors, parents, NGOs, etc.).

School Food

All food consumed in schools

School Meals

Nutritious, well-balanced, appealing, high quality and culturally acceptable meals that are provided by schools at lunchtime.

Impact

By impact we refer to the impact on pupils' dietary intake and educational, attendance as well as health and wellbeing (e.g. obesity, dental, mental health) as well as economic outcomes (immediate and long-term)

Free School Meals (FSM)

FSM refers to free school meals for eligible pupils (which could be for all where UFSM have been implemented and, where this has not occurred and eligibility is means-tested, for those who meet certain eligibility criteria; the current policy varies across the UK).

Universal Free School Meals (UFSM)

This refers to free school meals for everyone, across the UK.