

Procurement of chicken products for school meals in Wales



Countryside Alliance investigation results

January 2026

INTRODUCTION

The Countryside Alliance has undertaken an investigation into the procurement of chicken products for school meals in Wales, examining whether public sector purchasing is supporting Welsh and British food producers and aligning with stated commitments on food standards, sustainability and local sourcing.

This work builds on the Countryside Alliance's wider research into public sector food procurement across the UK. In August 2025 the Countryside Alliance published a [comprehensive report into food procurement](#) across the UK public sector, revealing that most government departments and councils are failing to monitor or prioritise British produce in their catering and procurement policies.

Concerns about the sourcing of chicken used in Welsh school meals were brought to the attention of the Countryside Alliance by interested parties in 2025, citing that chicken products were being imported for school meals from countries outside of the EU, specifically Thailand.

Those concerns were subsequently raised publicly in the Senedd. On Wednesday 23 September 2025 during Plenary, Jenny Rathbone Labour Senedd Member for Cardiff Central confirmed this when, in an exchange with the First Minister, she called on her own Welsh government to work on "cleaning up public procurement of food, so that we support Welsh companies to feed our children, rather than importing chicken from Thailand and processed food laden with palm oil".

This investigation draws on information provided by Welsh local authorities and examines the extent to which imported chicken is used in school meals across Wales. The findings set out in this report demonstrate that the use of imported chicken is widespread rather than the result of isolated decisions by individual councils.

This report sets out a series of recommendations aimed at ensuring that public money spent on school meals supports Welsh farming, high food standards and a more sustainable food system.

Key findings

- Merthyr Tydfil Council reported that 99.35% of the chicken in their school meals came from Thailand and China
- Conwy Council reported that 94% of their school chicken as being sourced from outside both the UK and EU
- Gwynedd Council stated that 87.62% of their chicken products, for which data was available, came from Brazil, Thailand and China
- Caerphilly Council reported that 87.32% of their school chicken as being sourced from outside both the UK and EU
- Out of 21 councils, just two (Anglesey Council and Bridgend County Borough Council) sourced all chicken meat for school meals from the UK
- Not one council was able to report the proportion of Welsh chicken they procured for school meals

To read the full results go [here](#)

Key recommendations

The Countryside Alliance is calling on the Welsh Government to take urgent action to ensure that public money spent on school meals supports Welsh farming, high food standards and sustainability.

- **Review and reform school meal procurement frameworks to prioritise Welsh and British produce**

Procurement frameworks often prioritise cost over food standards, provenance and sustainability, which has resulted in councils sourcing chicken from countries with lower welfare and environmental standards than those required of Welsh farmers.

Welsh government should ensure local authorities review and reform their procurement frameworks to ensure that they are able to prioritise sourcing locally, to ensure high animal welfare, environmental standards and food miles are important, rather than price alone.

- **Introduce mandatory transparency and reporting on food provenance in public sector catering**

At present, there is no consistent requirement for councils to report where food served in schools is produced, leaving parents, taxpayers and policymakers in the dark. The Welsh government should require all local authorities to publish clear, standardised data on the origin of food procured for school meals. Transparency would drive better decision-making, accountability and alignment with the government's own commitments on local and sustainable food.

Taken together, these measures would ensure that school meals reflect the values Wales claims to uphold: high food standards, environmental responsibility and support for local farming. With the right policy framework in place, school meals can

become an example of public money being spent well, feeding children while strengthening Welsh agriculture and building a more sustainable food system for the future.

Discussion

The widespread use of imported chicken in Welsh school meals is not accidental, nor the result of isolated decisions by individual councils. It reflects a combination of procurement frameworks, funding constraints and wider agricultural policies that disadvantage Welsh producers and make imported products the default option.

Local authorities frequently cite cost and availability as the primary reasons for relying on imported chicken, though we should note that some local authorities used UK reared and produced chicken in school meals, proving it is possible. These pressures are real, but they stem from a longer-term erosion of domestic supply.

Years of squeezed farm margins, labour shortages and rising input costs have reduced the resilience of the British poultry sector. More recently, policy uncertainty, including the Family Farm Tax, the abrupt closure of the Sustainable Farming Incentive in England and ongoing uncertainty surrounding the implementation of the Sustainable Farming Scheme in Wales has further undermined confidence, making it harder for producers to invest and plan for the future. While councils may face genuine challenges in sourcing Welsh and British chicken in this context, the sheer scale of imported meat entering school meals remains deeply concerning.

At the same time, Welsh farmers are required to meet some of the highest animal welfare and environmental standards in the world. Yet public money is routinely spent on food produced to significantly lower standards and transported thousands of miles. This creates a clear contradiction at the heart of public procurement policy, undermines confidence in how public funds are used, increases food miles and represents a missed opportunity to support local economies, rural employment and sustainable food production.

The findings also raise important questions about food traceability in public sector catering. In many cases, councils struggle, or fail completely, to clearly identify and report where the food served in schools originates, limiting transparency and accountability. Not one council was able to report the proportion of Welsh chicken they procured for school meals.

Without robust and consistent traceability, it is difficult for policymakers, parents and taxpayers to assess whether public procurement is delivering on Welsh Government commitments around local sourcing, sustainability and high food standards.

This investigation also highlights structural barriers that prevent Welsh and small-scale poultry producers from supplying local schools. Complex tendering processes, large minimum volume requirements and inflexible contracts often exclude small and medium-sized farms, even where there is strong local demand for Welsh produce. More flexible, regional procurement models could enable local supply chains to play

a greater role, keeping money within rural communities and strengthening food resilience.

While the Countryside Alliance welcomes the Welsh Government's recent £8 million increase in funding for Universal Primary Free School Meals, which raised the per-meal rate to £3.40, cost remains a significant constraint. The current rate does not fully reflect the higher costs of sourcing Welsh and British chicken produced to high welfare and environmental standards. If public procurement is to support domestic food production and reflect the standards expected of Welsh farmers, funding levels and procurement frameworks must align with that ambition.

Taken together, these issues point to a disconnect between agricultural policy, public procurement and food standards. Addressing the use of imported chicken in Welsh school meals will require coordinated action to improve traceability, reform procurement practices and ensure that public sector budgets genuinely support the values Wales claims to uphold.

Conclusion

The findings of this report make one thing clear, public money spent on school meals is not currently supporting Welsh farmers, high food standards, or sustainable food production. Instead, it is being used to buy imported chicken produced to lower welfare and environmental standards, often transported thousands of miles, while Welsh producers struggle to access these vital public contracts.

Poor traceability, opaque reporting and procurement frameworks that prioritise cost over local supply and quality have created a system that undermines rural communities and misses a key opportunity to invest in Welsh agriculture. Small and medium-sized poultry farms, which could supply local schools, are effectively shut out, while councils continue to rely on cheaper imports.

School meals should be a tool to strengthen local farming, support rural economies, and deliver healthy, sustainable food to children. The Welsh government now has the opportunity and the responsibility to ensure that public procurement reflects the values Wales claims to uphold: supporting Welsh farmers, safeguarding high standards, and building a resilient, sustainable food system.

The Countryside Alliance is calling on the Welsh government to act urgently. Welsh children deserve food produced to the highest standards, and Welsh farmers deserve public contracts that recognise their quality, care, and commitment. Public procurement must work for Wales not against it.

Methodology

The Countryside Alliance sent Freedom of Information requests to local authorities in Wales who were asked:

1. Sourcing by Origin

Please state, as a percentage or volume if available, the proportion of chicken (including all chicken products such as nuggets, roast chicken, chicken burgers, etc.) used in school meals that is:

- (a) Produced and reared in Wales
- (b) Produced and reared in the rest of the UK (outside Wales)
- (c) Produced and reared outside the UK, but in the EU
- (d) Produced and reared outside the UK and outside the EU

If precise percentages are unavailable, please indicate whether any chicken is sourced from each of these categories (e.g., “yes/no/unknown”).

Further clarification was also sought with the following questions:

- a. Please state, as a percentage or volume if available, the proportion of chicken (including all chicken products such as nuggets, roast chicken, chicken burgers, etc.) used in school meals that is produced and reared in the UK.
- b. Please state if the chicken (including all chicken products such as nuggets, roast chicken, chicken burgers, etc.) used in school meals that is produced and reared outside the UK and the EU is sourced from Thailand, and if not, please could you state which country or countries it is sourced from.

2. Supplier

Regarding supplier, please indicate whether they are required under contract to source UK or Welsh-origin chicken only.

3. Accreditation

Please confirm whether your authority's school catering service (or its contractors):

- (a) Specify Red Tractor, RSPCA Assured, or equivalent assurance schemes for chicken procurement.
- (b) Collect or record any data on the country of origin of chicken purchased.
- (c) Comply with the necessary EU regulations as per all meat

If available, please attach or link to any relevant policy or procurement documentation that specifies origin requirements for meat and poultry.