



The

Superpowers

of

Free School

Meals

Evidence Pack

Autumn 2022

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Acknowledgements



About Feed the Future

Feed the Future is a campaign led by a coalition of organisations including The Food Foundation, Bite Back 2030, School Food Matters, Child Poverty Action Group, Impact on Urban Health, Chefs in Schools, Jamie Oliver Ltd, The National Education Union and Sustain. This coalition is making the case that Free School Meals should be extended to more children.

Visit: endchildfoodpoverty.org/feedthefuture



About the School Food Working Group

The School Food Review Working Group is a coalition of 36 organisations spanning charities, educational organisations, catering companies, unions and academics, committed to working together to improve children's health by reforming the school food system.

Visit: schoolfoodmatters.org/school-food-review



About The Food Foundation

The Food Foundation is an independent charity working to address challenges in the food system in the interests of the UK public. Working at the interface between academia and policymakers (parliamentarians, civil servants, local authorities, business leaders), we use a wide range of approaches to make change happen including events, publications, media stories, social media campaigns and multistakeholder partnerships. We also work directly with citizens to ensure their lived experience is reflected in our policy proposals. We work with many partners on a range of different thematic areas, working closely with academics to generate evidence and campaigners who can drive change. We are independent of all political parties and business, and we are not limited by a single issue or special interest.

Visit: foodfoundation.org.uk



'When we feed kids well, when we act with kindness and integrity in our politics, the benefits are profound. It truly is a superpower – setting them up to get better grades, better jobs, and so putting £8.9 billion back into the economy over 20 years. Let's hope our politicians can step up to the plate.'

JAMIE OLIVER, CHEF AND CAMPAIGNER

With thanks to our funders

Impact on Urban Health

Impact on Urban Health is a part of Guy's & St Thomas' Foundation, and is committed to achieving health equity by helping urban areas become healthier places for everyone to live.

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Nuffield

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social wellbeing. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare and Justice. It also funds student programmes that provide opportunities for young people to develop skills in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-founder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.

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Contributors

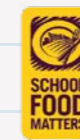
Many thanks from The Food Foundation to the School Food Review Working Group, and particularly to all the individual contributors to this Evidence Pack: Myles Bremner (Bremner Consulting), Caroline Cerny (Bite Back 2030), Barbara Crowther (Children's Food Campaign, Sustain), Shona Goudie (The Food Foundation), Cerys Kettleby (Children's Food Campaign, Sustain), Zoe McIntyre (The Food Foundation), Stephanie Slater (School Food Matters), Sean Turner (School Food Matters), Mari Burton (NEU), and many more.

In addition, we gratefully acknowledge these research contributions to the Evidence Pack:

- » **New cost-benefit analysis of Free School Meals:** *Investing in Children's Future: A Cost Benefit Analysis of Free School Meal Provision Expansion*, Impact on Urban Health
- » **The evidence from London boroughs:** *Universal Free School Meals reduce child obesity and help with the cost of living* – Angus Holford and Birgitta Rabe, ISER, University of Essex

Thanks to Katy Cooper for her assistance with collating and finalising this evidence pack.

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sustain
the alliance for better food and farming





Free School Meals help children **THRIVE**

The policy delivers many benefits:

- Boosts attainment and attendance, and increases a child's lifetime earnings
- Improves food security and helps families save on food costs
- Improves diet quality and helps combat childhood obesity, saving the NHS money in the long term

We've seen great progress over the last few years in England

- 2014** Government introduced Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM) so every child in the first three years of school has a hot, nutritious meal at lunchtime.¹
- 2015** New School Food Standards are introduced and made mandatory to help ensure school food is nutritious and good quality.²
- 2022** FSM permanently extended to children from families with no recourse to public funds.³


It's getting more urgent to tackle the rising health and social inequalities in our society

- 2020** The Covid-19 pandemic dramatically exacerbated food insecurity, leaving many families vulnerable to hunger and poor diet.
- 2021/22** Obesity rates in Year 6 children increased by 2.6 percentage points between 2019–2020 and 2021–2022, peaking even higher during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.⁴ Over a third of children leave primary school above a healthy weight, and children who live in lower income areas are twice as likely to be affected.⁵
- April 2022** 17% of UK households with children were affected by food insecurity. Over 2.6 million children were living in these households.⁶
- June 2022** 1.9 million (22.5%) pupils were on means-tested Free School Meals⁷ – but 800,000 children below the poverty line still don't qualify.⁸
- Sept 2022** Levels of food insecurity among households with children rose to 26%. This represents a total of 4 million children.⁹
- Oct 2022** Unprecedentedly high food and fuel bills driving inflation, which will force more families to choose between food and fuel in winter.¹⁰


There's still work we need to do to make sure every child across England has access to a healthy school meal

There are still large differences between who can get a nutritious school meal across the UK nations:


ENGLAND

- » Universal Infant Free School Meals (Reception to Year 2).¹¹ 
- » Families means-tested in both primary and secondary school with eligibility for Free School Meals set at family earnings of £7,400 (after tax, not including benefits).¹²
- » Four London boroughs additionally provide meals for all primary school children.¹³

NORTHERN IRELAND

- » No Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM). 
- » Means-tested FSM available in primary and secondary schools, with a threshold of family earnings of £14,000 (after tax, not including benefits). There is also a commitment to review eligibility.¹⁴


WALES

- » All primary school children will get a Free School Meal at lunchtime by 2024. Roll-out is already complete in Reception.¹⁵ 



- » Secondary school threshold for eligibility is £7,400 (after tax, not including benefits).¹⁶

SCOTLAND

- » Universal Infant Free School Meals (Primary 1-3). 
- » Universal Free School Meals rolled out in Primary 4 and 5, with a commitment to extend to 6 and 7, and to pilot delivery in secondary schools.¹⁷
- » Secondary school threshold for eligibility at £7,920 (after tax, not including benefits).¹⁸

Where can we go from here?

Let's not stop until every child is able to eat a healthy meal at school so they can always be ready to learn and achieve their potential

1 Widen eligibility in England to all children from families in receipt of Universal Credit (or equivalent benefits) to help children most in need – an additional 1.4 million children will benefit

This commitment is a vital response to the rising cost-of-living pressures on families. This needs to happen immediately.

2 Extend provision to all school children in primary school

This will support the local economy by increasing job opportunities in the school food sector, leading to better training for staff, and driving up school-food quality and uptake. It will also remove all stigma from school food and ensure all children have an equal opportunity to thrive and be healthy.

3 Extend provision to all school children in secondary school



Executive summary

Purpose

This Evidence Pack presents key data and evidence on Free School Meals (FSM) gathered from a range of independent sources. The intention is to demonstrate to policymakers the evidence that investment in FSM makes sense socially, morally and economically. This supports the call of a diversity of public figures from Jamie Oliver to Michael Gove, as well as key stakeholders (such as the School Food Review Group and its coalition of members, including non-governmental organisations and charities, local authorities and professional education bodies), who have advocated for improvements to FSM provision by the Government. The government-commissioned National Food Strategy also recommended that eligibility for FSM be extended, in both Part 1 (2020) and in the final report, published in 2021.



'Access to healthy food ... is just as much part of good education as high-quality teaching and good extracurricular activity ... Given the scale of the challenge we face and the benefits it brings, in the wider debate we are having about where extra pounds secure value it seems to me that [extending FSM to all children from families in receipt of Universal Credit] is a more-than-worthwhile intervention'

MICHAEL GOVE, FORMER SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION (2022)¹⁹

Current context

Today, in England, we enjoy a universal school meal offer for children in Reception until Year 2, after which a threshold for entitlement to FSM, set at an annual household earning of less than £7,400 (not including benefits and after taxes), comes into force. Entitlement criteria in England greatly diverge from Wales and Scotland, where universal provision across all primary schools is being rolled out, and Northern Ireland where eligibility is set at double the level of England (£14,000).

Now record food inflation and soaring energy prices are gravely impacting families: the average household is expected to spend at least £2,500 per year on energy alone over the coming two years.²⁰ Low-income households are being hardest hit, as a larger share of their income is spent on essentials compared to higher-earning households. On p. 22, survey data helps us to understand the reality for many low-income families: over a quarter of all children experiencing food insecurity in September 2022, double the rate of January the same year. Children themselves describe instances of hunger (p. 23) – and teachers corroborate their testimonies, with more than eight in every ten teachers saying that they see children come to school hungry because their families cannot afford enough food (p. 21).

'The Government should recognise how important Free School Meals are for struggling families, and increase eligibility and the amount that is paid for each meal'

ANNE LONGFIELD, FORMER CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER FOR ENGLAND (2022)²¹

We believe that every child should have access to good nutrition across the whole school day.

We celebrate government investment in children's health and the introduction of the National School Breakfast Programme and Holiday Activities and Food Programme.

However, #FeedTheFuture is firmly focused on Free School Meals and extending access to all children, beginning with those from families on Universal Credit.

Introduction

Free School Meals (FSM) have been a cornerstone of our state education system since 1906 and, over the decades, every political party has supported the policy's progress (see p. 18 for more detail). For many children, a Free School Meal can be their main source of hot, nutritious food. But we know that provision is currently falling short: the restrictive eligibility criteria in England means some 800,000 children living below the poverty line don't qualify for a Free School Meal at school.²²

At a time when households are facing unprecedented financial pressures, a vital first step is to prioritise support for these children by extending eligibility to all households with children in receipt of Universal Credit. We see this as a first step towards rolling out FSM to all children in state-funded schools. The infographic on pp. 6–7 sets out a roadmap for strengthening this vital policy for the challenging times in which we live.

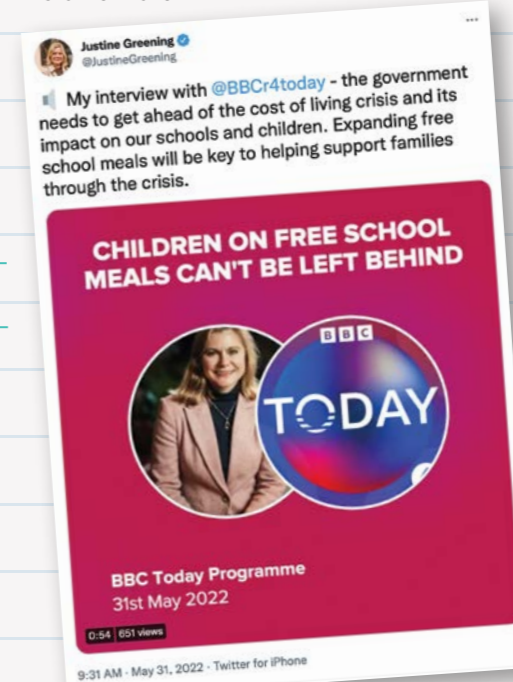
However, investment in Free School Meals is not solely a response to the cost-of-living crisis: there is compelling evidence that action now will have positive impacts for decades to come. This year, PwC was commissioned by Impact on Urban Health to conduct the most ambitious

analysis to date of the societal and economic benefits of increasing FSM provision in England. We are extremely pleased to present these groundbreaking results (on pp. 14–15) that show how **expanding entitlement sets the stage not only for a healthier generation of children, but also for a more vibrant and productive society in the future.**

This is supported by evidence of further direct benefits: pp. 10–14 sets out how Free School Meals foster community and aid academic performance, supporting children's engagement in class and future productivity. Free School Meals also have a positive impact on children's weight (pp. 16–17) and provide savings for households.

We urge policymakers to act immediately on the evidence presented here.

It is very clear that investing in school meals now will lead to long-term benefits to a child's life, health and prosperity. This is an urgent appeal that is endorsed not just by civil society and campaigners but by the medical profession, teachers, parents, policymakers, the public at large – and by children themselves.



'I'm from Birmingham and I have lived experience of food insecurity. The cost-of-living crisis is getting worse, and families are struggling to survive. Giving children one good nutritious meal in school is really important for their wellbeing, for their physical health and for their mental health. Every single child should have access to food, no matter where they live'

YUMNA HUSEN, 17-YEAR-OLD YOUNG FOOD AMBASSADOR FOR THE CHILDREN'S RIGHT2FOOD CAMPAIGN & CHAIR OF BITE BACK 2030'S BIRMINGHAM YOUTH BOARD

The **superpowers** of Free School Meals

Imagine if there was something we could do that would ensure that our school children are **healthier and happier, do better in school**, and **earn more over their lifetime** – and that all this can come at a cost of around £2.50 per child each day?

Free School Meals have this superpower.

Children who have Free School Meals are...

... healthier

Children who eat FSM **consume more fruit and vegetables**.²³ Free School Meals are much healthier than packed lunches: only 1.6% of packed lunches meet the Government's School Food Standards.²⁴ Packed lunches are more likely to contain confectionery, savoury snacks and sweetened drinks, and less likely to contain vegetables than FSM.

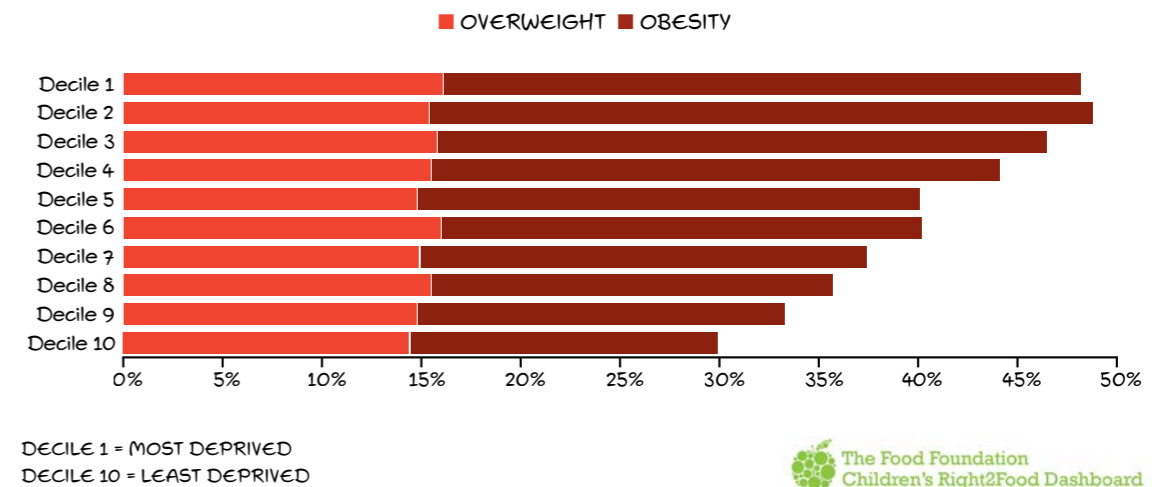
FSM can help to **reduce obesity**: providing Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM) led to a reduction in obesity rates and a higher proportion of children within a healthy weight range in the UK.²⁵ The research on pp. 16–17 of this report provides strong further evidence of this benefit.

No single intervention can, on its own, create the healthy environment that is needed to ensure that all our children remain a healthy weight. But providing FSM for all is an important part of solving this issue.

FSM may also **reduce health inequalities**,²⁶ as well as improving health and wellbeing.²⁷ The reductions in obesity among children receiving FSM may help to reduce the strong obesity gradient that is evident across families: the most well-off children are less likely to be living with obesity, on average, than less well-off children.²⁸



Percentage of children in Year 6 living with overweight and obesity by deprivation group (England only)²⁹



'Offering a healthy meal at school is an important opportunity to promote health for every child in the UK'

DR CAMILLA KINGDON, PRESIDENT, ROYAL COLLEGE OF PAEDIATRICS AND CHILD HEALTH (2022)³⁰

... and happier

Food insecurity affects children's mental health and wellbeing, with children from families that are food insecure being more likely to suffer with mental health problems, including hyperactivity and inattention, suicidal thoughts, and mood and anxiety disorders.³¹ Simply being worried about where food will come from is sufficient to reduce children's wellbeing when compared with children from food-secure households.³²

Eating a school meal has been shown to be the best lunch option associated with **good mental wellbeing**.³³ This is also particularly important for the 4 million children currently living in households experiencing food insecurity, for whom a nutritious FSM is so important.³⁴ In surveys in 2020 and 2021, over half of children from food-insecure households who were receiving FSM reported feeling stressed and worried on a daily basis.³⁵ A recent survey of teachers also found that over

'My friend wasn't eligible for Free School Meals in primary, but he became eligible in secondary and he told me he used to worry about eating when he was in primary school. With Free School Meals, people can go into school not worrying about food or learning'

18-YEAR-OLD, QUOTED IN BITE BACK 2030, MORE THAN A MEAL: THE REAL IMPACT OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS

half of teachers felt that children coming to school hungry display anxiety.³⁶ And it is not just the hungry children themselves who are affected: a recent survey by Childwise suggests that nearly half of all children say that they feel upset that some children do not have enough to eat at school.³⁷

... do better in school

'Free School Meals allowed me to eat the healthy foods which my family couldn't afford and kept me hydrated throughout the school day. I could maintain my concentration in lessons, so secured top grades at GCSE. After winning a scholarship to an independent Sixth Form, I completed three degrees'

LOUISE POWELL, DIRECTOR, FILMMAKER AND BBC NEW CREATIVE FROM MIDDLESBROUGH

Being hungry affects behaviour. **When asked about children coming to school hungry, 88% of teachers reported pupils being excessively tired, 84% reported them being easily distracted, and 74% observed disruptive behaviour.**³⁸ A 2018 review of Universal FSM by the Education Policy Institute³⁹ reported that teachers felt pupils' readiness for learning improved as a result. Teachers also reported improved behaviour and concentration in the classroom and parents felt that their children's dining etiquette and mealtime behaviour improved. This link between school food and behaviour has also been seen in the UK⁴⁰ (through an evaluation of the Food for Life Partnership programme, which accredits quality school food provision in this country) and also in the United States.⁴¹

FSM can also help to foster a sense of community in schools. Henry Dimbleby and John Vincent noted in the 2013 School Food Plan: *'When children sit down to eat with friends and teachers in a civilised environment, it cements relationships, helps them to develop social skills and reinforces positive behaviour throughout the day.'*⁴²

Findings from the Department for Education Universal FSM pilot⁴³ noted **improved academic**

'During exams, I was eating a lot of unhealthy food and drinking energy drinks because it was cheaper and easier than getting a full meal [at school]. I think this affected my performance'

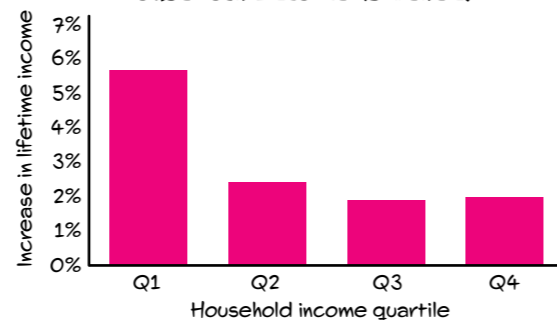
16-YEAR-OLD, QUOTED IN BITE BACK 2030, MORE THAN A MEAL: THE REAL IMPACT OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS

attainment, with children on UFSM making between four and eight weeks' more progress in maths and English than similar pupils in comparison areas. Importantly, attainment was most improved for pupils in less affluent families. Similar results have been found in other studies in the UK,⁴⁴ and in places such as Sweden⁴⁵ and the United States.⁴⁶ Many different effects of school meals may be responsible for this increase in attainment, including better health and pupils being better equipped to absorb material presented in school after eating a nutritious lunch.⁴⁷

... earn more over their lifetime

Petter Lundborg, Professor of Economics at Lund University, has recently published a long-term study of Sweden's Free School Meal programme.⁴⁸ This **detailed economic analysis has shown not only an increase in attainment, but a 3% increase in lifetime income for those exposed to FSM during their entire time at primary school.** Importantly, the study explains that the economic benefit is more pronounced for children from the poorest households, suggesting that FSM reduced socioeconomic inequalities in adulthood. For children from families in the bottom quartile by household income, receiving FSM for nine years increased lifetime income by almost 6% – a benefit-to-cost ratio of 7:1 (see also the next double-page spread for a cost-benefit analysis of extending FSM provision in England).

The increase in lifetime income from nine years of school lunches, by household income (Sweden)



... and money stays in families' pockets

Families are under intense financial pressure. At the time of writing, food and drink inflation is at 13.1%⁴⁹ and the energy price freeze is currently set at £2,500 for the average household for the next two years.⁵⁰ Parents can save hundreds of pounds a year by not having to pay for school meals or for packed lunches. **A family with two children, living in poverty but not eligible for Free School Meals, currently has to pay around £450 a year** if paying for a school lunch each day (see pp. 17–18) on the evidence from London boroughs).

'My children go into school in the morning feeling motivated, they want to do well. But by the end of the day they're flagging, because without access to Free School Meals they're not getting the right nutrition'

PARENT, QUOTED IN BITE BACK 2030, MORE THAN A MEAL: THE REAL IMPACT OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS

'I certainly think we need to look at the options as more and more people are feeling the pinch. Expanding eligibility for Free School Meals is a feasible option'

JO GIDEON, CONSERVATIVE MP FOR STOKE ON TRENT⁵¹

What the government says

In 2013, the Department for Education (DfE) published a set of infographics extolling the virtues of Free School Meals. All these reasons are still valid today, and the research presented in this Evidence Pack continues to back up these important benefits. We have annotated this 2013 infographic from the DfE to reflect 2022 data.⁵²

FREE school meals health benefits
 Almost ~~20%~~ **23.5%** of children are obese by the time they leave primary school
 A school meal helps address this by contributing to a balanced diet and encouraging children to try healthy options
 HM Government #FreeSchoolMeals

FREE school meals health benefits
 Pilot studies showed a ~~26%~~ **26%** increase in the number of children eating vegetables at lunchtime in the free school meals pilot
 The number consuming crisps and soft drinks reduced by **18%**
 HM Government #FreeSchoolMeals

FREE school meals learning benefits
 Students who received free school meals in pilot studies were found to be **2 months** ahead in maths and English
 HM Government #FreeSchoolMeals

FREE school meals savings for families
 Parents could save hundreds of pounds per year by not having to provide a packed lunch
~~£400~~ **£450**
 HM Government #FreeSchoolMeals

In contrast, only 1.6% of packed lunches meet School Food Standards!

New

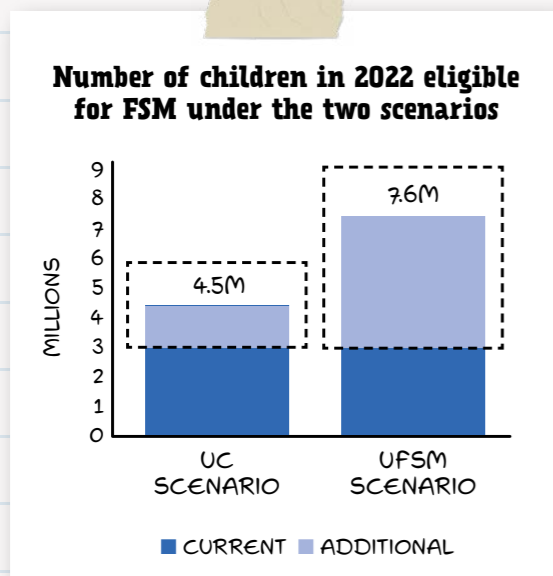
cost-benefit analysis

of Free School Meals

New analysis shows significant return on investment for extending FSM first to all children from families in England who are on Universal Credit and secondly to every school child in state-funded education in England.

Two scenarios...

The research – *Investing in Children's Future: A Cost Benefit Analysis of Free School Meal Provision Expansion*⁵³ – was commissioned by Impact on Urban Health and undertaken by PwC, and is the most ambitious analysis to date of the societal and economic benefits of expanding FSM provision in England. It explores two scenarios for expansion over the period 2025 to 2045, giving enough time for increases in productivity and lifetime earnings to start to materialise after children leave school.



1 FSM is expanded to all children in England in households on Universal Credit: **The Universal Credit (UC) scenario.**

2 FSM is expanded to all children in England, regardless of family income: **The Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) scenario.**

Although the projected costs and benefits are modelled from 2025 to allow for on-the-ground changes and policy change, the expansion could and should be put in place immediately.

'Feeding children properly brings a cost-benefit to the Government. It boosts education outcomes. It eases the financial and mental health pressures on millions of parents on low incomes'

ROBERT HALFON, CONSERVATIVE MP FOR HARLOW, CHAIR OF THE EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE (2020)⁵⁴



...with impressive returns

UC scenario

Under the UC scenario, the core benefits over 20 years add up to **£8.9 billion**, compared to a total cost of £6.4 billion (including the capital expenditure needed to extend provision of FSM to more children). This is a return of **£1.38 for every £1** invested.

The cost in the first year of provision would be **£477 million**.

- » Increased saving on food costs for families: **£5.9 billion**
- » Increased lifetime earnings and contributions: **£2.9 billion**
- » Other smaller cost savings to schools and to the NHS (obesity costs)

When the wider economic benefits are included, the economic returns increase further: an additional **£16.2 billion** will be generated in the economy under the UC scenario.

UFSM scenario

Under the UFSM scenario, the core benefits over 20 years are **£41.3 billion**, compared to a total cost of £24.1 billion (including capital expenditure). This is an even higher return: **£1.71 for every £1** invested.

The cost in the first year of provision would be **£1.8 billion**.

- » Increased saving on food costs for families: **£22.5 billion**
- » Increased lifetime earnings and contributions: **£18.5 billion**
- » Other smaller cost savings to schools and to the NHS (obesity costs)

Taking the wider economic benefits into account, an additional **£58.2 billion** will be generated in the economy under the UFSM scenario.

And the true return to society of this investment in our children may be even greater than this modelling suggests, with further benefits both for the NHS from reduced obesity and diet-related diseases in adulthood and for the wider food production sector, such as from local growing and supply of ingredients for meals.

What benefits were assessed?

Previous studies have focused on specific impacts of FSM, such as child nutrition, but this report fills an important gap in the evidence by taking a more extensive and comprehensive approach to the costs and benefits.

Core benefits arise directly from the children who receive FSM, through improvements across two pathways:

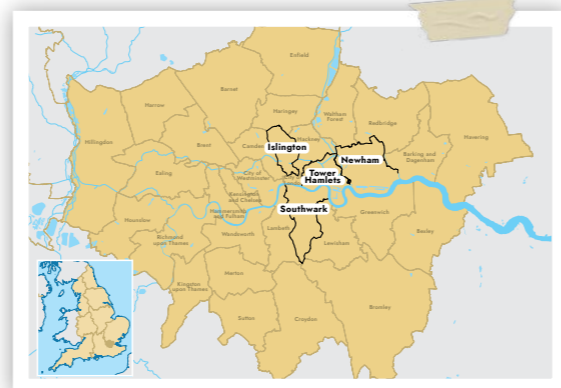
- » **Education and employment:**
 - » Improved educational attainment in the medium term, leading to improved productivity and employment longer term, contributing to improved lifetime earnings and contributions.
 - » Improved ability to learn and reduced absenteeism in the short term – with linked cost savings for schools (such as catch-up programmes).
- » **Health and nutrition:**
 - » Reduced financial pressure for families on lower incomes, enabling the purchase of more nutritious food at home.
 - » Decreased incidence of obesity and diet-related diseases in childhood – the savings calculated are for the lower health costs of a reduction in obesity among children receiving FSM over the 2025–2045 period only.

Wider benefits are indirect, generated over and above the core benefits, impacting the broader economy and supply chain. These include **increased demand for school food catering, expanding employment opportunities and increasing spending in the school food economy**. They are not included in the core cost-benefit analysis as they involve multiplier effects, but the total wider benefits are presented above.



The EVIDENCE from London boroughs

This section sets out new research into the wide-ranging benefits of the provision of **Universal Free School Meals** to children in **four London boroughs**. It has been provided for this Evidence Pack by Angus Holford and Birgitta Rabe, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex.



Universal Free School Meals reduces child obesity and helps with the cost of living

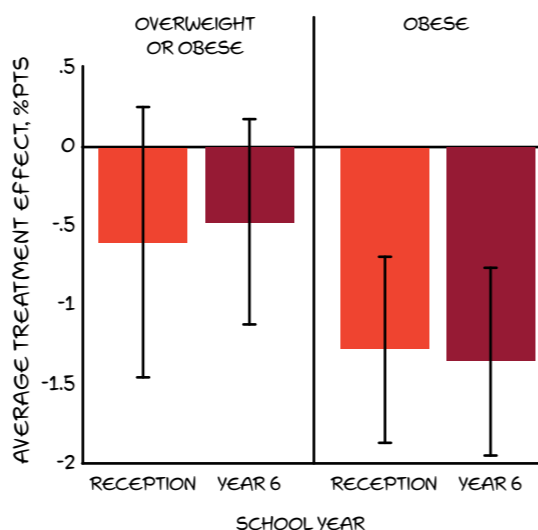
The impacts of providing free meals to primary school children has recently been studied by looking at Universal Free School Meal (UFSM) schemes already implemented in primary schools in four local authorities (LAs) in London: **Newham** (from 2010), **Islington** (from 2011), **Southwark** (from 2012) and **Tower Hamlets** (from 2014).⁵⁵

Comparing changes in outcomes in these LAs with those that do not run UFSM schemes enables us to evaluate the causal impact on bodyweight outcomes among Reception and Year 6 children, and on household food expenditure.*

The key findings on bodyweight outcomes are that, compared with what would have happened if UFSM had never been introduced:

- » Receiving UFSM reduces prevalence of obesity by 9.3% among Reception children and 5.6% among Year 6 children on average.
- » This corresponds to a 1.3 and 1.4 percentage points reduction in obesity (Figure 1). These impacts are substantial, given how hard it is to influence obesity through other interventions involving exercise or healthy eating education.

Figure 1: Average impacts of exposure to UFSM on bodyweight outcomes

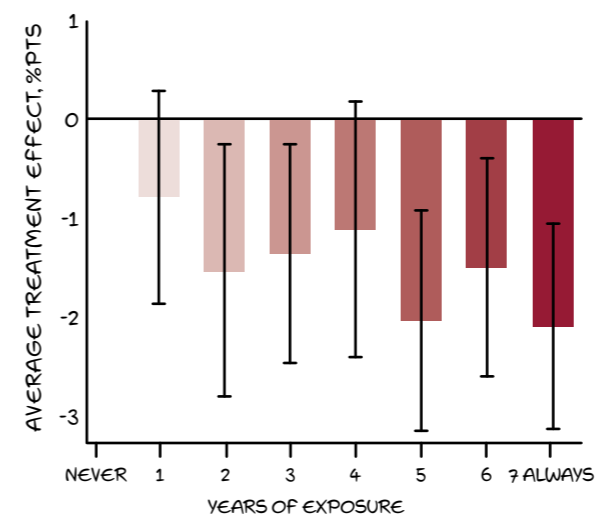


SOURCE: National Child Measurement Programme, 2007–19.

*For full results and methodology, see MiSoC Explainer: Holford, A. and Rabe, B., 2022, Impacts of Local Authority Universal Free School Meal schemes on Child Obesity and Household Food Expenditure <https://doi.org/10.5526/misoc-2022-003>

- » Effects are largest among Year 6 children who received UFSM the longest: the reduction in obesity was 8.4% among children who received them throughout primary school (2.1 percentage points reduction – Figure 2).

Figure 2: Impacts on obesity for Year 6 children by duration of exposure to UFSM



SOURCE: National Child Measurement Programme, 2007–19.

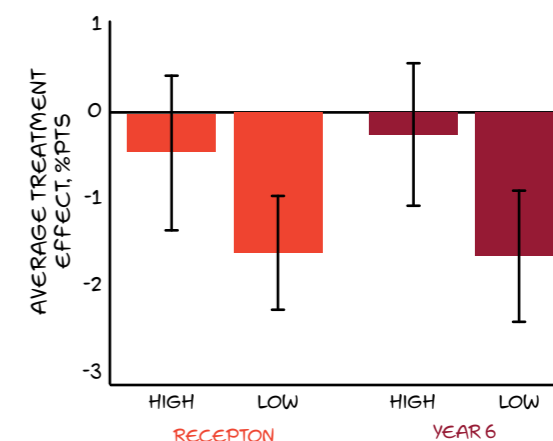
The key findings on household food expenditure are that:

- » Families on average save approximately £37 per month in total on food spending, based on a household with two adults and two primary-aged children (see table).
- » About half of this saving is due to reduced spending on 'eating out', which includes takeaways and paid-for school meals.
- » The reduction in expenditure is smaller than the value of the free meals, suggesting households are consuming a higher value of food in total.

These results show that UFSM schemes reduce the prevalence of obesity among children and help households with the cost of living. The finding of a cumulative effect over time of providing free meals suggests that starting free meal provision early and maintaining it throughout primary school would maximise the impact on cutting obesity rates and contribute to addressing the significant long-term healthcare and indirect productivity costs of obesity. Universal provision throughout primary school would also ensure that all children have access to a meal of high nutritional standards, while also helping families with school-age children with the cost of living.

- » The effect on children receiving UFSM for the first time in Year 6 is smaller than the corresponding effect on Reception children. This indicates that the bodyweights of older children are harder to shift in the short term.
- » The overall relationship suggests the impact of UFSM on obesity rates is cumulative, i.e. it adds up over time.
- » The impact of UFSM is much smaller in schools with pre-existing high prevalence of obesity (Figure 3). This could be because the school and home environment around high-obesity schools is less conducive to losing weight. These families and schools may benefit from additional interventions.

Figure 3: Average impacts on obesity by pre-existing school-level obesity



SOURCE: National Child Measurement Programme, 2007–19.

Table 1: Impacts of UFSM on household food expenditure in last four weeks

	Super-market food (1)	Eating out and take-aways (2)	Total (1)+(2)	Market value of UFSM*
One UFSM-eligible child in a one parent, one child family	£6.20	£5.47	£11.47	£34.50
Two UFSM-eligible children in a one parent, two child family	£15.27	£13.46	£28.23	£69.00
One UFSM-eligible child in a two parent, two child family	£10.02	£8.83	£18.52	£34.50
Two UFSM-eligible children in a two parent, two child family	£20.04	£17.67	£37.04	£69.00
Sample size	46,765	46,768	46,582	

SOURCE: UK Household Longitudinal Study, waves 1–11. All figures based on 2015 prices.



Support for Free School Meals

Support for Free School Meals comes from MPs across the political spectrum, from the public, from teachers, from those who provide the meals, and from children themselves.

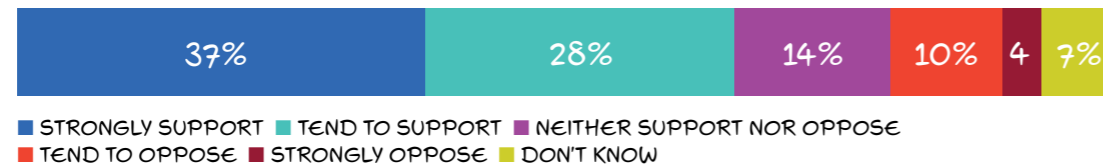
Cross-party support

From the first Education Provision of Meals Act in 1906 to Wales' and Scotland's commitments to Universal FSM in primary school in 2021, every political party has played a role in ensuring school children have access to good nutrition as a core pillar of their education.

In a representative survey of MPs conducted in September 2022, two-thirds of MPs said they supported expanding Free School Meals eligibility to all households in receipt of Universal Credit.⁵⁶

MPs' support for FSM (Sept/Oct 2022)

The Government expanding Free School Meals eligibility to all school children in England from households in receipt of Universal Credit (or equivalent benefits).



'The Government must act now to introduce Universal Free School Meals for all primary school children. This would help build a better London for everyone, saving families hundreds of pounds a year, ensuring all primary pupils are eating a healthy, nutritious meal at school and also eliminating the stigma associated with being eligible for Free School Meals, to increase uptake among those who need it most'

SADIQ KHAN, LABOUR MAYOR OF LONDON (2022)⁵⁷



'The proposition [to extend FSM to all children from families in receipt of UC] is urgent, right and timely'

MICHAEL GOVE, FORMER SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION (2022)⁵⁸



Beyond politics – a united vision for healthy school food

Conservatives

- » Introduced Universal Infant Free School Meals in 2014, while in Coalition Government with the Liberal Democrats.⁵⁹
- » The Scottish Conservatives 2020 'Restore our schools' commitment to universal primary school meals⁶⁰ helped build cross-party support for Scottish Government to introduce the policy starting in 2021.
- » Introduced revised mandatory School Food Standards from 2015, following recommendations from a commissioned School Food Plan.⁶¹

Labour Party policy in October 2022, which 'calls on the leadership to ... commit to rolling out Universal Free School Meals for all pupils in primary and secondary schools [and] calls on the party at all levels to campaign for ... free school meals for all'.⁶⁹

» Committed to roll out universal primary school meals in Wales under current Government as part of a cooperation agreement with Plaid Cymru.⁷⁰

Plaid Cymru Party of Wales

- » Committed to universal school meals in every primary and secondary school in Wales, supporting local farmers, supply chains and businesses.⁷¹
- » Signed cooperation agreement with Welsh Government in 2021 backing the introduction of universal primary school meals during current parliament.⁷²

Liberal Democrats

- » First Education Provision of Meals Act in 1906, to ensure food was provided for the poorest children in school, was introduced under a Liberal Government.⁶²
- » Universal Infant Free School Meals was a flagship LibDem policy in the 2012 General Election and introduced in 2014 under the Coalition Government.⁶³
- » Pledged to introduce universal primary school meals and expand eligibility in secondary schools in its 2019 manifesto.⁶⁴

SNP

- » Currently expanding Free School Meals to all primary school children nationally and committed to piloting Universal Free School Meals in secondary schools.⁷³
- » Committed to a 'good food nation', ensuring school meals are healthy, nutritious and well sourced.⁷⁴

Labour

- » Introduced free school milk for all primary school children in 1946⁶⁵ and expanded Free School Meal eligibility to sixth formers and further education colleges in the 1996 Education Act.⁶⁶
- » Nutritional school food regulations introduced in 2001.⁶⁷
- » Pledged to introduce universal school meals for all primary pupils in 2019 manifesto,⁶⁸ as well as expanding entitlement for secondary pupils.
- » Labour Conference passed a motion into

Green Party

- » Committed to ensuring as a minimum requirement that all school children receive a balanced and nutritious school meal every day, increasing sourcing from local and organic, GM-free ingredients, and increasing pupils' involvement in growing, preparing and cooking food.⁷⁵

Public support

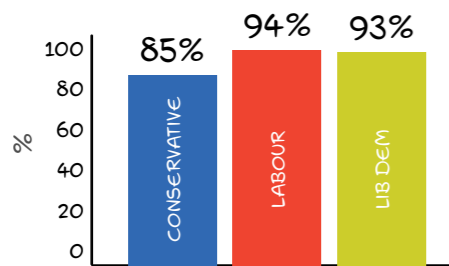
Poll after poll shows strong public support for Free School Meals – even before the current cost-of-living crisis. A survey held in late summer 2022⁷⁶ asked the public how much responsibility they think different organisations should bear for helping children impacted by food poverty – and it is very clear that Government is seen as being responsible:

87% of the public think that the Government has a lot or some responsibility for helping children – up from 84% at the same time in 2021

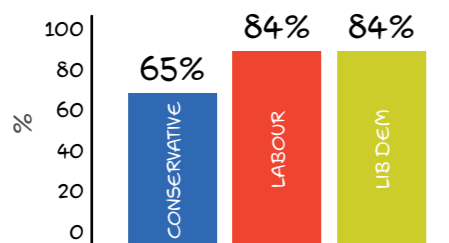
They were also asked if they supported the expansion of FSM eligibility to all school children in England from households in receipt of Universal Credit – and again, there was strong support, regardless of political persuasion:

72% of the public support the expansion of FSM to all children in receipt of Universal Credit

The Government is responsible for helping children impacted by food poverty (% agreement by party voted for)



FSM should be expanded to all children on Universal Credit (% agreement by party voted for)



'I grew up in poverty and I had the benefit of Free School Meals from age nine until I left school at 18 ... Free School Meals are an investment in all of us'

MICHELE PRICE, SOLICITOR, MAGISTRATE AND CHARITY TRUSTEE

A survey by Sustain's Children's Food Campaign to in early 2022⁷⁷ also asked about whether FSM should be extended to all children (universal provision) and, once again, the results were very clear:

66% of UK adults would support the Government making school meals free for all primary age children – and this rose to 72% when asked about this in the context of cost-of-living increases

85% of respondents with children aged 5–10 would like to see the Government make school meals free for all primary-school age children

A 2022 survey on school meal provision, drawing on data from over 300,000 users of a cashless payments platform,⁷⁸ found that 68% of parents and carers would choose to spend any increased funding for schools on measures relating to food such as subsidising meals, extending eligibility or improving quality.

In addition, Demos research published in 2021 found that three-quarters of UK adults agree that the Government must step in for children whose parents are unable to feed them, with nine in ten agreeing that every child has the right to have a healthy meal at least once a day. A majority also agreed with the statement that 'school meals should be free for all students so that poor students are not stigmatised'.⁷⁹

'Free School Meals provided me with hot, nutritious meals which kept me full so I could have the energy to focus on my studies and work hard to get to where I am today. It also let me feel included, as I could socialise and eat the same meals alongside my friends – and brought comfort to a stressful time for me and my family. It's something I'm passionate about and led me to create a campaign advocating for 24/7 access to food for NHS staff'

NEELY MOZAWALA, FOUNDER OF NO HUNGRY STAFF

Guido Fawkes @GuidoFawkes
 In many countries free school meals for all children are the norm. It is a welfare measure which is perfectly targeted. Middle class parents can view it as a small tax rebate.
 7:27 AM · May 31, 2022 · Twitter for iPad

Teacher support

Teachers see every day that the intensifying cost-of-living crisis is leading to more children unable to buy lunch, which undermines attempts to level up education for the most vulnerable children. Twice in 2022, school leaders and education bodies, representing a million teachers and education specialists in England, wrote to the Government calling for an immediate extension of Free School Meals to more children, beginning with those from families on Universal Credit, and for a commitment to extend to all children, as Wales and Scotland have done.⁸⁰

This support from teachers for FSM has been reiterated in a recent survey commissioned by Chefs in Schools, which has provided concerning evidence on the increase in food insecurity among children at school.⁸¹

83% of teachers surveyed felt that there are children who come to their school hungry because their families cannot afford enough food – and almost all of those expressing this view also reported that, over the last six months, the number of children coming to school hungry had increased. Almost four out of five teachers saw children with insufficient amounts of food in their packed lunches.

'[In] our school dinner halls we have had instances of children coming in with just a small yoghurt or two solitary rashers of bacon in their lunchboxes. It is hard to forget the sight of a child pretending to eat from an empty lunchbox'

NICK CAPSTICK OBE, HEAD TEACHER, CEO OF THE WHITE HORSE FEDERATION MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST (2022)

'Teachers can only do so much on their own. All schools must have the appropriate resources to be able to address issues of child hunger and poverty ... This includes the expansion of Free School Meals to every child whose family is on Universal Credit'
 JUSTIN WELBY, ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY, AND PAUL BUTLER, ARCHBISHOP OF DURHAM (2020)⁸²

Almost a quarter of the teachers felt that children are skipping lunch due to poverty – and there is very clear support for the expansion of FSM to more children: 85% of those surveyed felt that there are children who are currently ineligible but who would benefit from FSM.

- 83%** of teachers feel children come to school hungry
- 79%** see children with insufficient food in packed lunches
- 85%** think currently ineligible children would benefit from FSM

Caterer support

School kitchen teams are a core part of delivering healthy school meals – and a recent survey by Chefs in Schools found that 68% of teachers regard the school kitchen team as being part of the school community.⁸³

Caterers support the extension of Free School Meals and are confident that extension to all children from families that receive Universal Credit can be rolled out immediately, as an October 2022 statement from LACA indicates:⁸⁴

'Free School Meals mean that my kids have something different to eat at school every day, and they get the salad bar, and they'll get a piece of fruit or some fruit juice. And the dinner ladies are great, they know my child'
 PARENT, QUOTED IN BITE BACK 2030, MORE THAN A MEAL: THE REAL IMPACT OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS

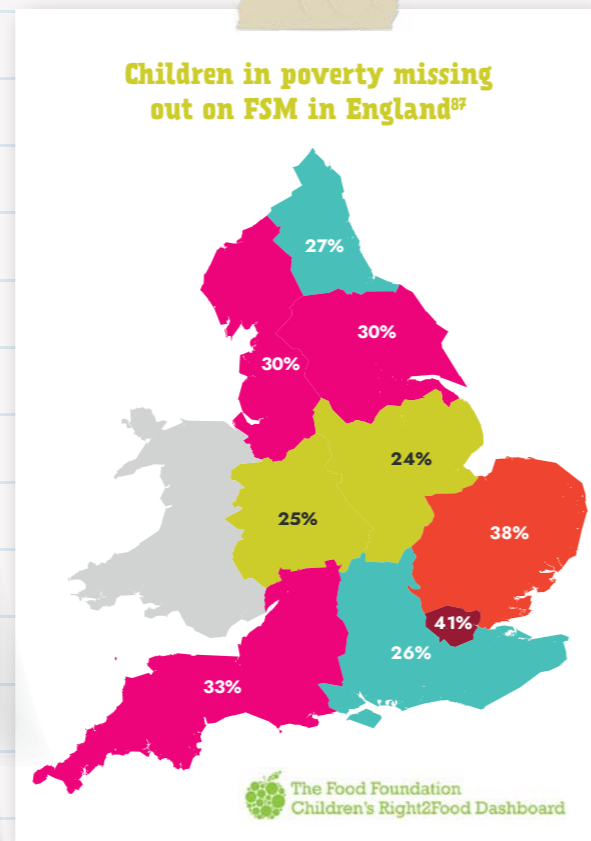
Statement from LACA (the leading professional body representing the school food sector) – October 2022:

The cost-of-living emergency means it is now more important than ever for Free School Meals to be extended to children whose families meet the threshold for Universal Credit. Too many children are falling through the cracks – they are not entitled to a Free School Meal, but they are going hungry which significantly impacts their ability to learn. We know that for many children, this is their only hot meal of the day, which is why an extension is so urgently needed for the estimated 800,000 currently missing out.

Whilst each school will, potentially, have its own issues to address, LACA considers that the infrastructure needed to facilitate the roll-out of an extension of FSM to those families on Universal Credit would be manageable because the numbers of pupils per school could be accommodated without having to massively overhaul dining rooms or the length of the lunch breaks.

Children missing out

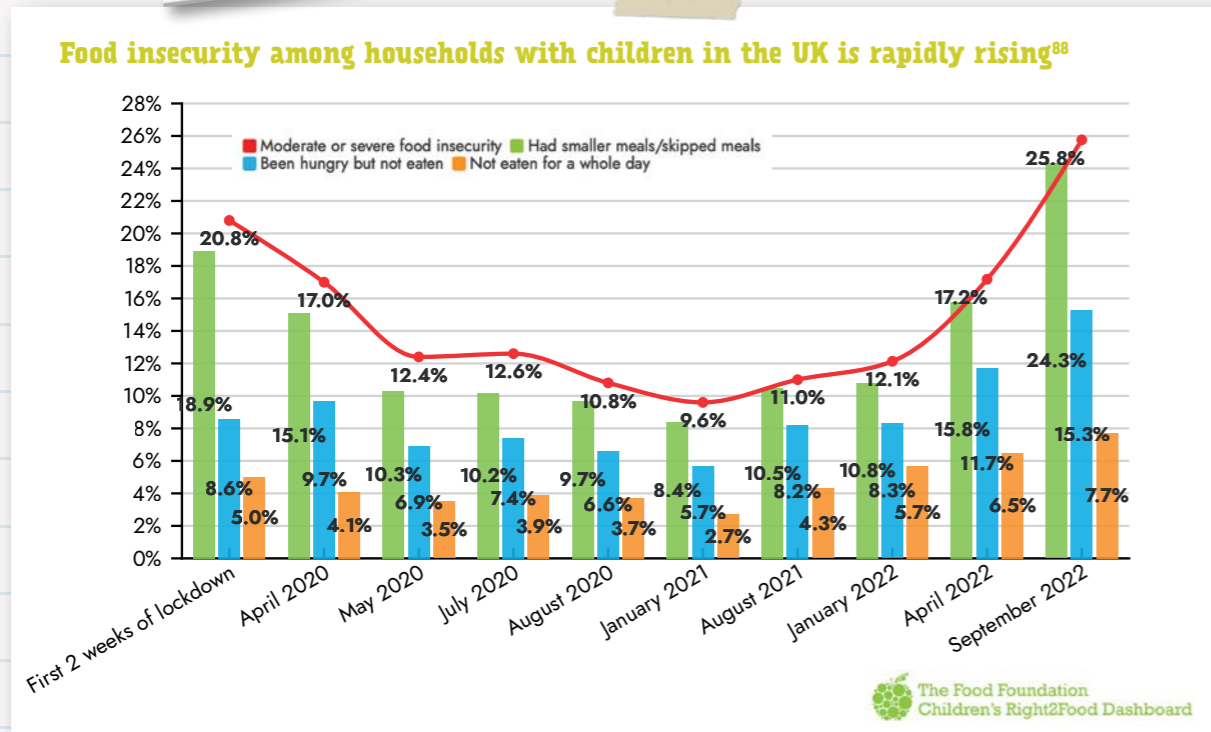
Free School Meals can be an important part of ensuring that children's right to good food is upheld. All too often, however, children are missing out: an estimated 800,000 children who are living in poverty are not currently receiving FSM.⁸⁵ Research in 2020/21 found that 23% of children not receiving FSM were food insecure.⁸⁶



'There's two chicken shops about one minute walk from my school that sell two wings and chips for £1. A school dinner is £2.40. If it was free, people would not eat unhealthily'
 15-YEAR-OLD, QUOTED IN BITE BACK 2030, MORE THAN A MEAL: THE REAL IMPACT OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS



The cost-of-living crisis is making the situation worse and is disproportionately impacting households with children.



Recent interviews undertaken by Bite Back 2030 give insights into the lived experience of children in school today, illustrating very real concerns about missing out on healthy food – both at home (due to food insecurity) and at school.⁸⁹ Their comments are included throughout this Evidence Pack.

Children also care about each other. A recent study by Childwise found that **nearly one in three children have shared food with friends at school because they didn't have enough to eat**, and more than one in five know friends who are hungry and do not have enough to eat at school.⁹¹

Children care about food: they care about where it comes from and they care about what they eat. Work by Fix our Food asked children from 11 Yorkshire primary schools what they would do about food at school, were they the head teacher, with answer options including school trips to learn about food, school gardens and reducing waste – but the top priority was Free School Meals for all.⁹⁰



'My experience of food poverty is I grew up not having enough money to afford food. I went without food in primary school a lot of the time because I wasn't on Free School Meals'

ASHA, 15-YEAR-OLD YOUNG FOOD AMBASSADOR FOR THE CHILDREN'S RIGHT2FOOD CAMPAIGN FROM CUMBRIA

What's for lunch?

When a Free School Meal is not an option, food diaries can give insights into what kind of food is accessible for young people who sometimes struggle to afford food at school. Three young people from Bite Back 2030 kept a food diary to record alternative lunch options including a packed lunch, food from a supermarket and a meal from a food outlet.

meals, they do indicate that the food options readily available to young people do not provide the same nutritional benefits as a school meal, which must meet School Food Standards.⁹² For example the meal options recorded did not include fruit and vegetables and tended to include food and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt.

While these diaries provide a limited snapshot of what young people eat as an alternative to school

The Appendix to this Evidence Pack (pp. 30–31) sets out food diaries written by Bite Back 2030 youth board members.

In brief:



Snapshot of School Food Standards

School Food Standards

Must be one portion of fruit and one of veg every day – and at least three different fruit and veg every week

One or more portion of starchy food and non-dairy protein every day

No confectionery, chocolate or chocolate-coated products and no more than two portions of food containing pastry or deep-fried each week – and only healthier drinks



Where are Universal Free School Meals already a reality?

Some local authorities in England have made the choice to expand Free School Meal provision, using money from their own budgets, to provide this service in their schools. Universal Free School Meals at a primary level are already a reality in Islington, Newham, Tower Hamlets and Southwark in London. Meanwhile, in Scotland and Wales, the Devolved Governments have funded this policy nationally, and in both nations this is currently being rolled out to all primary children. In Hammersmith and Fulham, in London, pilots show that Universal Free School Meals do have a positive impact on secondary school children too. These three case studies below provide more context.

Scotland

In 2020, the Scottish Government committed to extending Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) to all primary-aged pupils in Scotland. Before this announcement, UFSM had only been available to pupils in years P1 to P3 (ages 5–7).

Support for this policy comes from Scotland's children's commissioner, Bruce Adamson, who has highlighted the levels of food insecurity in Scotland and the stigma resulting from means-tested school meals.

Implementing a policy change of this size has its challenges – in particular, kitchen and dining facilities in schools were not always ready to meet the huge increase in demand. **The Government has responded by pledging an additional £30 million investment** in extending school kitchens and dining rooms to prepare schools for UFSM.

'We have long accepted the universal provision of the rights to education and healthcare, and children's right to food should be fulfilled as a necessary universal good in the same way'

BRUCE ADAMSON, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S COMMISSIONER SCOTLAND⁹³

Years P4 and P5 started to receive UFSM in August 2021 and January 2022 respectively. The Scottish Government is planning to reach years P6 and P7 during the academic year 2022/23.

Newham

In 2009, Newham Council took part in the Government's Universal Free School Meals pilot. When the pilot came to an end in July 2011, Newham decided to extend the scheme through its pioneering Eat for Free programme, ensuring all primary school children in the borough continue to receive Free School Meals.

Benefits of the programme are clear from the number of students eating a school meal in Newham: **over 90% of Key Stage 2 pupils eat lunch at school**, which is a massive increase on the 45% uptake before the scheme began.⁹⁴

'Ten years on the scheme, with its grant conditions and principles, continues because it clearly addresses health and well-being, pupil performance and attainment, and community wealth building'

ANDY GOLD, HEAD OF FOOD STRATEGY, NEWHAM COUNCIL PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT

The council has received positive feedback about the programme from schools and parents across the borough. A consultation on Newham's Eat for Free programme demonstrated the popularity of the programme, with residents, parents and teachers overwhelmingly supporting keeping UFSM, with over three-quarters of respondents thinking the council should provide FSM for all pupils.⁹⁵

In Newham, **a school meal is much more than the food on a plate**. They have been setting

the example of what a whole school approach to food looks like. In collaboration with schools, Eat for Free grant conditions mean healthier and more sustainable food is served and better food education takes place. The programme also increases investment in the local economy, securing good food jobs at or above the living wage.

For more on the impacts of UFSM in four London boroughs (Newham, Islington, Southwark and Tower Hamlets), see pp. 16–17.

Hammersmith and Fulham

After hearing from schools about families experiencing food poverty and with the number of pupils eligible for FSM rising, Hammersmith and Fulham decided to take action, launching an innovative pilot scheme in 2019 in which two secondary schools offered Free School Meals to all pupils.

While previous Universal Free School Meal pilots have looked at primary schools, Hammersmith and Fulham chose to focus on secondary schools. The rationale for this decision is, because secondary school is an incredibly important time for a student's development and as it is a time when young people are making more independent choices around the food they eat, **the pilot would be able to show how UFSM can change behaviour, instilling healthier food habits as young people transition into adulthood**.

Unfortunately, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has made tracking comparative data on some outcomes – such as educational attainment – very difficult. Nonetheless, findings from the pilot are encouraging. There has been a huge increase in the uptake of school meals, with **the percentage of students in one school eating a school meal on an average day increasing from 39% to 68%**.⁹⁶ As similar pilots have found, there has also been a large increase in the number of students who were previously eligible for Free School Meals eating a school lunch. Marcus Robinson, from the borough's children's services, comments: *'Universal programmes reach the target groups more effectively than a targeted programme.'*

'There aren't many interventions that have such a broad impact for only the cost of a meal'

MARCUS ROBINSON, PROGRAMME LEAD, HAMMERSMITH AND FULHAM'S CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Encouragingly, a pilot-school head teacher has reported positive changes in eating habits, bringing students who wouldn't usually sit down for a meal into the lunch hall and improving social interaction. **Teachers have also reported improved behaviour and engagement from students in afternoon lessons.**

The Hammersmith and Fulham pilot has shown that UFSM can be implemented successfully, with benefits to the whole school community.

'As local authorities, sadly because of government's underspending, we always have to make difficult choices, but I believe that this policy [universal primary school meals] has multi-benefits and therefore is really worth prioritising. But I think that it is for national Government to make this nationwide policy and then we wouldn't have to worry about this. National Government is responsible for the overall economic picture of our country.'

KAYA COMER-SCHWARTZ, LEADER OF ISLINGTON COUNCIL (2022)⁹⁷

Mithbusting

The evidence on Free School Meals is unequivocal – and yet criticisms are still levelled at it. These can be addressed head-on: **they are myths, not reality.**

1 Free School Meals are ~~too expensive~~ good value!

School meals deliver extremely good value for money, with wide-ranging benefits and with returns on investment of up to £1.71 for every £1 spent. It is not that it is expensive to take action: **it is that it will be expensive not to take action.**

Read more about the billions of pounds of benefits of Free School Meals on pp. 14–15.

According to new research carried out by PwC for Impact on Urban Health:⁹⁸

- » Extending FSM to all school children in England living in families receiving Universal Credit or equivalent benefits – an additional 1.4 million children – would **cost £477 million a year** (including an initial set-up cost of £10 million).
- » Extending FSM to every child in England, regardless of income, would cost £1.8 billion in 2025 (including set-up costs of £32 million).

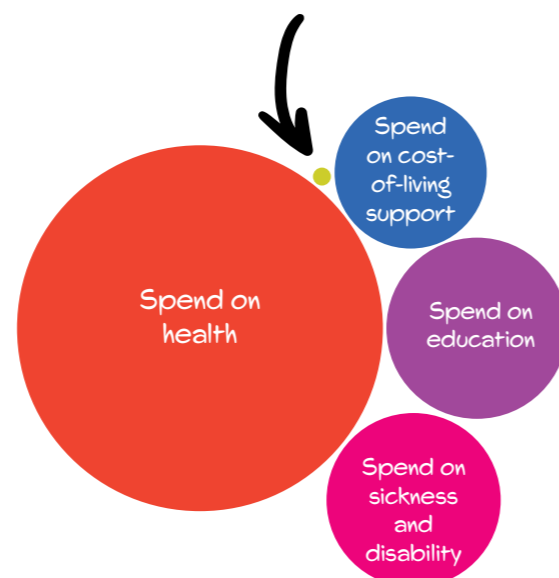
The annual costs of the UC scenario, an immediate priority, are projected to fall gradually in subsequent years in response to population changes (as the number of children are expected to fall over time) to £210 million in 2045.

'Planning budgets and finding creative solutions to cover the expense of subsidising meals takes time - time I would usually put towards the curriculum, but I love these children and want to ensure they are well-nourished. A simple solution would be to provide enough funding to ensure that every child can access good food at school.'

LISA WILLIAMS, HEADTEACHER, RUSHEY GREEN PRIMARY SCHOOL, LONDON

Small investments in FSM will help other investments go further⁹⁹

Cost of expanding Free School Meals to all children on Universal Credit (£477 million)



An investment of less than £0.5 billion per year pales into insignificance beside other government expenditure.

The Government has set a rate of £2.47 per child per day for benefits-related FSM in its National Funding Formula for schools¹⁰⁰ – meaning that, for less than the cost of a meal deal in a café or supermarket, children are being served a hot, nutritious meal.

SCHOOL FOOD FUNDING

A recent statement from educational funding specialists* within the School Food Review Working Group¹⁰¹ makes the point that funding for school food is complex – but reiterates that urgent action is needed:

If the Government is to ensure that all children from families in receipt of Universal Credit receive Free School Meals as quickly as possible, *'we believe the most pragmatic, short-term solution would be to administer this additional funding (estimated at £477 million) as a direct grant to schools, in the same way as the Universal Infant Free School Meals grant is administered'*.

The statement also calls for funding for FSM to rise with inflation, reflecting cost-of-living increases in school food operations, for the introduction of an auto-enrolment mechanism (to avoid placing extra administration onto schools), and additional funding provision for small schools (where economies of scale for school food are always challenging).

The Working Group *'urge[s] the Government to work with the sector to develop a clear, simple and transparent school food funding mechanism that gives schools consistency and clarity on allocations and associated conditions of grant for all the different school food interventions'*.

2 School meals are ~~of such poor quality that children will not benefit~~ provide good nutrition!

Millions of children regularly eat a high-quality, hot school lunch, provided for by hardworking school cooks and chefs. Although quality can still be improved in some cases, the majority of school meals served every day contain far more nutrition – including fresh fruit and vegetables – than an average packed lunch.

School Food Standards have been in place for cooked school lunches since 2006 and were revised in 2015: these restrict confectionery, savoury snacks and soft drinks and require that vegetables, protein and dairy are included in each meal. In contrast, a study of packed lunches in 2016 found that, although nutrition of packed lunches had increased slightly since 2006, **just 1.6% of packed lunches met the standards that are set for school food.**¹⁰²

In February 2022, the Government's Levelling Up White Paper committed to oversee compliance with School Food Standards. The Department for Education is now working with the Food Standards Agency to pilot measures with local authorities on quality assurance.¹⁰³

Key to sustaining and improving the quality of school meals is ensuring that there is enough money in the school food system to pay for good food and staff training. **There is a virtuous circle to the economics of school food: the more meals a kitchen is producing, the more efficiently the meals can be made.** The current challenge is being exacerbated as fewer parents can afford to pay for a school meal – so the economies of scale are less pronounced at the same time as prices are rising. The real pressure point at the moment is on families, who are struggling to pay for food.

Extending FSM will keep money in parents' pockets, ensure that children are offered a healthy meal every school day, and put more funding for quality meals back into the school catering system.



*From the Association of School and College Leaders, National Association of Head Teachers and Institute of School Business Leadership

3 Children ~~do not~~ want to eat school meals!

Children do want to eat school meals: a survey from Childwise¹⁰⁴ shows that one in three children who don't currently get a Free School Meal say they would like to have one. In addition, many more parents would welcome their children having Free School Meals: over half of those whose children don't currently receive FSM would like them to.¹⁰⁵

However, for some children, receiving Free School Meals can be a stigmatising experience because it singles them out to their peers as being poor. This can reduce take-up and result in children not receiving the nutritious lunch to which they are entitled.

This reluctance by some children to have a Free School Meal doesn't mean the children should not receive them at all: it means that the delivery mechanism for administering FSM is important.¹⁰⁶ There are different ways in which children receiving FSM can claim their meals at school, including electronic payment cards, fingerprint systems, paper vouchers or by saying their names or numbers at the till. Stigma can be reduced when schools use electronic cards and fingerprint-based systems, but auto-enrolment would also be a particularly helpful way to ensure anonymity.

'On half days they come in with a paper bag, which has a sandwich and piece of fruit. I think it's the most mortifying experience I've ever had because they make it incredibly obvious that you can't afford your lunch. They bring it into class and you have to collect it'

15-YEAR-OLD, QUOTED IN BITE BACK 2030, MORE THAN A MEAL: THE REAL IMPACT OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS

It is likely that the more children who receive a Free School Meal, the less stigmatising it will become.

Universal FSM can help reduce stigma, as eligibility is no longer defined by income threshold.¹⁰⁷ Evidence shows that uptake by those eligible for means-tested FSM increases when the offer is universal. The stigma associated with Free School Meals, which can reduce take-up, is removed by viewing school meals as a basic entitlement for all children.¹⁰⁸ There is also evidence that providing UFSM increases uptake of the meals for everyone, through mechanisms other than price: removing the stigma may be part of this.¹⁰⁹

FSM impacts all areas of schooling, including social relationships — helping to create bonds in the dinner hall through shared meal experiences. **There are clear benefits to the school community from pupils sitting down together and eating the same food, as well as observing and learning social skills through the shared dining experience.** This helps children learn the behaviour that enables them to be successful as an adult and a professional.¹¹⁰

'Growing up, I was always embarrassed about receiving Free School Meals. Schools with poor admin make it difficult to get Free School Meals and make it an embarrassing experience. The situation in my school was that you basically had to beg for Free School Meals, send a tonne of emails. Admin is a really big part of Free School Meals'

17-YEAR-OLD, QUOTED IN BITE BACK 2030, MORE THAN A MEAL: THE REAL IMPACT OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS

Our call to action

1

All children in state-funded schools in England from families in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent benefits should become eligible for a Free School Meal immediately.

2

This extension to eligibility is an urgent first step towards a long-term goal for the Government to provide comprehensively funded, nutritious school food for all school children.

Appendix

Food diaries: What do young people eat when they can't access a Free School Meal?

Bite Back 2030 asked three young people – who self-identified as young people who are not eligible for Free School Meals, but sometimes struggle to afford food at school – to keep a food diary of the options available to them as an alternative to a school meal including a packed lunch brought from home, a meal bought from a supermarket and a meal bought from a food outlet. A registered public health nutritionist compared the nutrition provided by these meals with the School Food Standards,¹¹¹ which are intended to ensure that school meals provide young people with the energy and nutrition they need across the whole school day.

Note: Some assumptions have been made as the School Food Standards set criteria for nutrition across the school week and the diaries just provide a snapshot of food consumed on a single day. In addition, full nutrition and portion size information was not available for the food diary meals, so a comprehensive comparison to School Food Standards criteria could not be done.

Nutritionist's comments: None of the food diary meals contain a portion of whole fruit or vegetables, compared with the requirement for at least one portion of each every day in school meals and a variety across the week. The food diary meals also included several portions of starchy carbohydrates and protein foods cooked in fat or breadcrumb- or batter-coated – these are limited to twice per week in the School Food Standards. In addition to an overall absence of nutritious foods, many of the meals contained food and drinks that are excluded from the School Food Standards, such as chocolate confectionery, crisps and soft drinks.

While these diaries provide a limited snapshot of what young people eat as an alternative to school meals, they do indicate that the food options readily available to young people do not provide the same nutritional benefits as a school meal.

Name	Meal + price	Commentary from young person
FOOD DIARY 1 – LONDON, 15		
DAY 1: Packed lunch from home	A Cadbury mini roll and a chicken sandwich with mayo in it Cost: not available	<i>'It tasted okay, I eat the same sandwich every day. I didn't feel full or energised after eating it, and felt hungry after an hour.'</i>
DAY 2: Meal from a supermarket	Tesco meal deal: Sushi, a packet of crisps and orange juice. Cost: £3 (or £3.50 without a Clubcard)	<i>'It tasted OK, I'm not the biggest fan of meal deals but I ate all of it and felt full afterwards.'</i>
DAY 3: Fast food outlet	Local chicken shop: 5 fried chicken strips, fries and a drink. Cost: £5.10	<i>'This tasted nice and I felt full after eating it. I don't know why but I felt tired afterwards – I just wanted to lie down and sleep.'</i>

Name	Meal + price	Commentary from young person
FOOD DIARY 2 – LONDON, 15		
DAY 1: Packed lunch from home	A chicken, bacon and cheese panini, with some chicken strips and a juice box. Cost: £3 (estimated)	<i>'It was filling, tasted good and was the right portions, because it's from home and I know what I want to eat and how much. Although it didn't energise me, it did stop me from being tired.'</i>
DAY 2: Meal from a supermarket	Boots meal deal – Katsu Curry Wrap, Fridge Raiders and a sparkling drink. Cost: £3.59	<i>'It was very filling and energising, I chose my favourite items so of course I enjoyed them. It was enough if not a bit too much to eat.'</i>
DAY 3: Fast food outlet	A portion of 2 wings and chips, and a fizzy drink. Cost: £3.50	<i>'The oily wings and crispy chips layered with sauce and salt provide energy but aren't necessarily filling. I think the price helps you feel good about it.'</i>
FOOD DIARY 3 – MANCHESTER, 14		
DAY 1: Packed lunch from home	A burger, waffles and a yoghurt Cost: £1.50 (estimated)	<i>'It tasted good and made me full, although it wasn't the healthiest meal.'</i>
DAY 2: Meal from a supermarket	Asda meal deal – sandwich, Walkers crisps and an Oasis drink. Cost: £2.90	<i>'It made me full. I have had meal deals before and they get quite boring, because of the cold sandwiches.'</i>
DAY 3: Fast food outlet	Mini pizza meal deal – small pizza, fries and a Fanta drink. Cost: £4.99	<i>'It tasted nice and made me full, but I didn't feel good about eating it; it isn't something I should be having after school.'</i>

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'Education can be a positive avenue out of poverty, but if children are hungry, how can we expect them to engage in learning? That's why I am calling on the Government to expand Free School Meal eligibility, in line with the National Food Strategy recommendations'
MARCUS RASHFORD, FOOTBALLER (2021)¹¹²

'Free School Meals were something my family relied upon – and every child in London deserves that safety net'

SADIQ KHAN, MAYOR OF LONDON (2022)¹¹³

'Clearly something is broken within that Free School Meal system. Trying to get something more robust and solid in place is desperately needed. For many of these kids, a Free School Meal is the only meal they get that's warm'

TOM KERRIDGE, CHEF (2022)¹¹⁴




'We are in the midst of a crisis where people on low incomes are struggling to put food on the table for their children, so the benefits of Free School Meals are felt more acutely than ever, which is why we were one of the first councils to introduce Universal Free School Meals for primary age children. The benefits of this include: supporting families with the rising cost of living, helping pupils engage in learning, enhancing academic performance, and improving nutrition for children for whom good quality food is often out of reach. Extending Free School Meals to all those in need has to be a Government priority, so the next generation can thrive'

COUNCILLOR JASMINE ALI, DEPUTY LEADER OF SOUTHWARK COUNCIL AND CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE, EDUCATION AND REFUGEES (2022)



The Food Foundation

International House, 6 Canterbury Crescent, Brixton, London SW9 7QD
foodfoundation.org.uk | +44(0)20 3086 9953 |  @Food_Foundation