

Feeding Our Future – State of the Nations – England

How much veg do English children and young people eat?

Average number of vegetable portions eaten by region and age group for 2012-2019¹

	England
Secondary school (11-16 years)	1.7
Primary school (5-10 years)	1.8

School food in England is ...

... provided to **3.1 million children** each day²

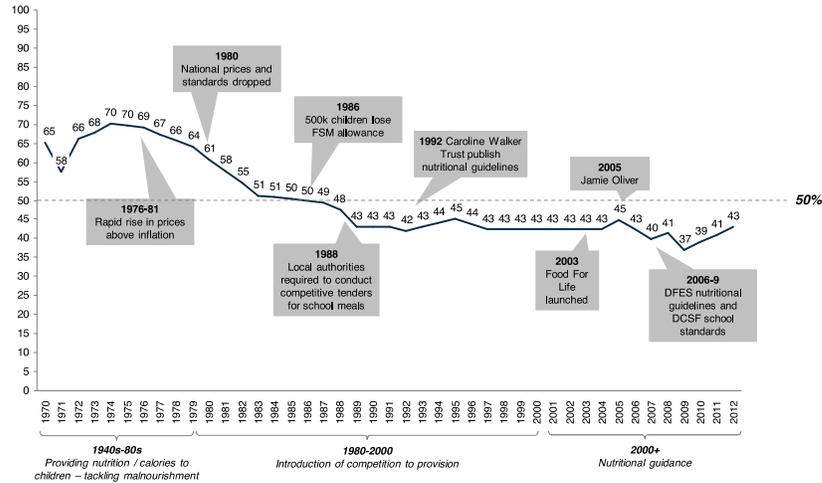
... served in **24,360 schools**³

... provided in a **variety of arrangements**, mostly with local authorities either delivering food or managing catering contracts with private suppliers⁴.

Currently school food provision in England is very mixed: some parents pay for meals, some get them free, and some send children in with packed lunches. The quality of school food also varies greatly; some school settings serving fantastic food; many others have a food offer which falls short of school food standards.

Looking back several decades, England has seen a decline in school meal take-up from around 70% in the mid-1970s to around 43% in the late 1980s/early 1990s, where it remained until 2012 (the last time we have solid data on this, via The School Food Plan. Small increases were seen in mid-1990s and again mid-2000s with a drop to 37% in 2009 (Figure 1)⁵.

Long-Term Trend In Take-Up of School Meals, 1970-2012
% pupils, Primary and Secondary Combined

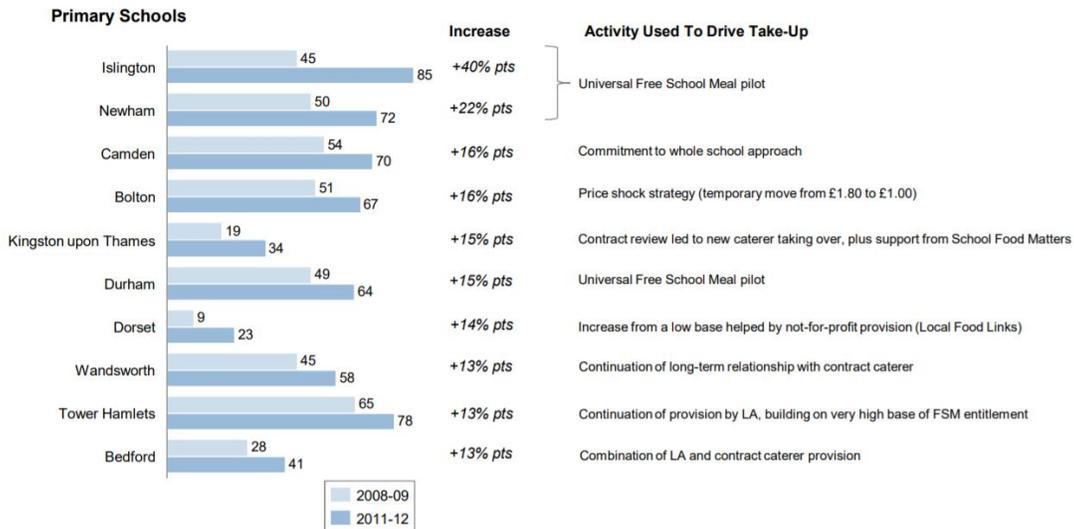


Across England’s 150 Local Authorities, average levels of take-up (including free school meals) in primary schools vary enormously – from 94% in the City of London to just 18% in Poole. This is true of secondary schools also, where the numbers are 70% in Hackney and 25% in Leicestershire⁶.

Analysis of uptake data as part of the 2013 School Food Study showed that some local authorities have seen more improvement in school meal take-up than others. Reasons are thought to vary across councils (see figure below). Islington Council, for instance, saw a 40% increase in school meal take-up due to a Universal Free School Meal pilot. In Camden, the commitment to a ‘whole school approach’ to food provision encouraged a 16% rise in take-up. In Bolton, the same result was achieved through a temporary price reduction in school meals from £1.80 to £1.00⁷.

Those LAs that have achieved significant improvement in take-up have typically made a major intervention on price or changed provision model

Largest Increases In Take-Up By LA
2008-09 to 2011-12



School meals vs. alternatives in England

In 2012/13, 83% of pupils in England had the option to pay for a school meal. Two-thirds of them, however, choose not to. Take-up for paid-for school meals was as low as 34% in some primary schools and 32% in some secondary schools⁸.

Most often, the school meal option is replaced with a packed lunch where school meals are not paid for. While a school lunch complying with the school food standards should average 530 calories per day, an audit study in 2010 found that 89 per cent of packed lunches exceeded this level, averaging 624 calories⁹. We know only 1.8 per cent of packed lunches are meeting food school standards¹⁰.

In the analysis undertaken for the 2013 School Food Plan, 17% of secondary school children appeared to be skipping lunch entirely or substituting with snacks. Price appears to be a key driver here: 33% of those who reported their children did not eat school meals said this was because they were too expensive¹¹.

Provision of Free School Meals (FSMs) and Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSMs) in England

In England, FSMs are provided based on eligibility criteria. UIFSMs are provided to all children in their first three years of school, as outlined in the framework of the Universal Infant Free School Meal (UIFSM) programme which was introduced in 2014¹².

The UIFSM programme represents a significant investment in enhancing the school environment for all children. In 2019/20, 1.4 million children out of the 1.7 million who took a free school meal on census day received their meal under the UIFSM policy¹³. Evidence has shown that UIFSM policy has contributed to some reductions in school absence rates (concentrated among FSM-eligible children), and a positive association between school meal take-up and educational development and attainment for all children, including those eligible for FSM. There is also evidence of a shift in Reception children's bodyweights to a healthier level over the course of the school year, with effects apparent for children in all but the richest and poorest schools¹⁴. Making school meals universally available may also address the stigma that can be attached to the Free School Meal system.

In 2020, 17.3% of pupils were eligible for free school meals, an increase from 15.4% in 2019. This increase in eligibility is spread across all schools¹⁵:

- The percentage of pupils in state-funded primary schools known to be eligible for free school meals increased from 15.8% to 17.7% in 2020.
- The percentage of pupils in state-funded secondary schools has also increased from 14.1% to 15.9% in 2020.
- The percentage of pupils in state-funded special schools has increased from 38.3% to 40.1% in 2020.

Beyond the infant free school meal programme, only children from families on very low incomes qualify for Free School Meals. The result of this is that many children who are experiencing food insecurity are missing out on a hot, nutritious meal for lunch. 2 in 5 children living below the poverty line do not qualify for Free School Meals. Children with No Recourse to Public Funds are currently able to access

Free School Meals, but this is only temporary as a measure introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic. The National Food Strategy recommends raising the household earnings threshold for FSMs from £7,400 to £20,000, to extend eligibility to children who are undocumented or have No Recourse to Public Funds (NPRF) and enroll eligible children for free school meals automatically.

Vegetables served in English schools

The school food standards in England recommend that schools should offer 1 or more vegetables portions to pupils at lunch every day¹⁶.

Accordingly, the Government Buying Standards (GBS) recommend one portion of veg as part of meals, a recommendation which did not change even after a consultation in 2019 that aimed to update the nutrition standards in the GBS. That said, the updated recommendation that main meals containing beans or pulses as a main source of protein are made available at least once a week¹⁷ is encouraging, as beans and pulses may count as one portion of veg (up to 80g).

The School Fruit and Veg Scheme in England

The School Fruit and Veg Scheme in England provides a piece of fruit or veg to all infant aged children between the ages of 4 and 7 who attend a state-funded primary - approximately 2.3 million children. The scheme has also been intermittently suspended during the pandemic and delayed confirming when it would be reinstated, despite the question being asked repeatedly in Parliament. Most recently in July 2021, the food and farming charity Sustain once again called for clarification on whether the SFVS will be reinstated come September 2021¹⁸.

The Food Foundation along with other organisations has called for the scheme to be extended to allow for an increase of intake of fruit and veg across England and to help embed healthy eating habits among children. However, there is ample scope to improve and expand the scheme which has not been properly evaluated since 2010. The scheme is currently weighted more towards fruit than veg, with high levels of waste due to poor quality produce reported anecdotally (for example, under ripe fruit or unwashed veg)^{19 20}. The Food Foundation supports the National Food Strategy recommendations published in 2021 that *“recommend that the government doubles the funding for the School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme, from £40.4m to £80.8m. But it should give the money directly to schools rather than administering the scheme centrally.”* The latter would enable schools to use funds for the scheme to purchase fruit and veg from smaller and/or local producers and may therefore help improve the quality of the produce provided.

Setting standards in England – but who monitors?

In England, the government is currently not tracking whether the money spent on school food is delivering meals that fulfil its own set of school food standards. Although additions made in 2019 to the Ofsted Inspection Framework now require inspectors to consider whether schools are developing pupils' understanding of healthy eating, they do not include a requirement for any truly comprehensive school food inspection. The long-delayed introduction of the Healthy School Rating Scheme (pledged in the Government's 2016 Childhood Obesity Plan and finally introduced in July 2019) again references school

food monitoring. The voluntary scheme rates primary and secondary schools on their compliance with school food standards based on self-assessed criteria – quite different to a mandatory, externally monitored mechanism rating school food standards that would be best practice here.

The Soil Association's Food for Life programme estimates that at least 60% of secondary schools in England are noncompliant with the school food standards²¹. And a 2020 review of food provided at 60 primary and secondary schools across one London borough, found that in many cases school food standards are not delivering when it comes to the food on children's plates despite being hypothetically compliant with the standards. Evidence also showed a lack of awareness that that school food standards should apply across the whole school day, not just to lunch. The report suggests that if this is the case in one borough, there is likely to be a similar pattern in other urban communities and calls for the Department for Education and local governments to put in place mechanisms that hold schools and caterers to account for meeting Schools Food Standards in practice²². The Food Foundation has also called for an independent watchdog that would monitor and inspect school and nursery meals²³.

Beyond the school gates

According to the 2012/13 School Food Plan evidence pack, just under 10% of students ate off-site²⁴.

With regards to regulating the food environment beyond the school gates, restrictions in England are vague: broadly the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) states that advertisements for products high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS product) must not be directed at under-16s through the selection of media or the context in which they appear, and no medium with an audience that consists of more than 25% of under-16s should be used to advertise HFSS products. Although posters and billboards are usually considered to be aimed at the general population, the ASA is likely to consider poster sites near schools to have a skewed audience towards a higher proportion of children. In line with other products (alcohol, gambling or e-cigarettes), marketers are encouraged to consider the '100 meter rule' for advertising HFSS products around schools, meaning that those products should not be advertised within 100 meters of a school boundary²⁵.

COVID-19 Impact: A surge in FSM eligibility in England

School closures during the first Covid-19 lockdown meant that UIFSM and FSM provision was halted for most children, with meals extended to children eligible for free school meals mostly through replacement vouchers issued during this period. A series of issues with provision, however, left many eligible children unable to rely on a regular, quality meal²⁶.

The deepening impact of the crisis on families is illustrated by a reported surge in children newly qualifying for FSM as many families lost income. In September, 29% of children (an estimated 2.2 million) aged 8-17 reported to be registered for FSM. Of these children, 42% (approximately 900,000) reported being newly eligible that term. In January 2021, there was a slight increase to 32% of children registered for FSM, equivalent to 2.5 million 8–17-year-olds. Official Government figures on the number of newly eligible children on FSM are yet to be released by all four UK nations. Despite the rise in registrations, many families remain unable to claim FSM due to the low eligibility threshold, leaving children to miss out and worry about their next meal. More details on the impact of COVID-19 on household food insecurity can be found in the Food Foundation's [A Crisis within a Crisis: The Impact of COVID-19 on Household Food Security](#) report.

While schools have since to varying degrees reopened, services in school canteens has been severely disrupted – many switching to takeaway style lunches, limiting menu choices, or under pressure due to capacity restraints. It is important as we prepare for a return of some semblance of normality in the 2021/22 school year to make every effort to encourage take-up of school meals and ensure adherence to school food standards going forward.

¹ NDNS, years 5-11 combined, 2012-2019. Waves were combined to increase sample sizes.

² <http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/School-Food-Plan-Evidence-Pack-July-2013-Final.pdf>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2020%20>

⁴ <http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/School-Food-Plan-Evidence-Pack-July-2013-Final.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/School-Food-Plan-Evidence-Pack-July-2013-Final.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/School-Food-Plan-Evidence-Pack-July-2013-Final.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/School-Food-Plan-Evidence-Pack-July-2013-Final.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/School-Food-Plan-Evidence-Pack-July-2013-Final.pdf>

⁹ <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/CPAG-Poverty167-Universal-infant-free-school-meals-Oct-2020.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/10/1/e029688>

¹¹ <http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/School-Food-Plan-Evidence-Pack-July-2013-Final.pdf>

¹² <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04195/SN04195.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2020>

¹⁴ <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/CPAG-Poverty167-Universal-infant-free-school-meals-Oct-2020.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2020%20>

¹⁶ http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/School_Food_Standards_140911-V2e-tea-towel.pdf

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/updating-the-government-buying-standards-for-food-and-catering-services-gbsf/outcome/the-government-buying-standards-for-food-and-catering-services-gbsf-updating-the-nutrition-standards-response-to-consultation#annex-a>

¹⁸ <https://www.sustainweb.org/news/jul21-sfvs/>

¹⁹ <https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/5ADAY/Documents/SFVS%20Factfile%20Newsletter%20May%202015.pdf>

²⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/nov/27/fruit-and-veg-used-in-scheme-for-english-schools-often-inedible>

²¹ https://www.foodforlife.org.uk/~media/files/sotn/sotn_2019.pdf

²² <https://www.gsttcharity.org.uk/sites/default/files/30-GSTC-%20Schools-min.pdf>

²³ https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/10333/html/#_ftn6

²⁴ <http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/School-Food-Plan-Evidence-Pack-July-2013-Final.pdf>

²⁵ <https://www.asa.org.uk/advice-online/food-hfss-media-placement.html>

²⁶ <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/investigation-into-the-free-school-meals-voucher-scheme/>