



Free School Meals statement

03.11.2021

It should be a top Government priority that our most at-risk children are don't go hungry. The commitment to continue funding for the Holiday Activities and Food Programme, confirmed in the Chancellor's budget, shows Government recognises the importance of shoring up the diets of our most disadvantaged children. But rather than an end point, this measure is only a first step in a much more comprehensive solution needed to alleviate child food insecurity in the UK. Recent data from The Food Foundation shows that between February and July 2021 parents reported that due to food insecurity: 1,363,520 children had to rely on low-cost food; 1,267,970 children had not had balanced meals; 394,020 children had not eaten enough; and 369,850 children skipped meals¹.

2.5 million children live in households that experienced food insecurity between February and July 2021 – these levels are approximately 27% higher than pre-Covid.

It is extremely worrying Government has not allowed more children to become eligible for Free School Meals despite this being a recommendation in the National Food Strategy. Both Scotland and Northern Ireland have inclusion criteria for Free School Meals which allow more children to benefit than in England. Nearly 50% of children experiencing food insecurity in England are still not eligible due to the low eligibility threshold ([reference](#)). This in turn means these children are excluded from holiday food provision as well. Yet 84% of the English public think Government should be responsible for helping children impacted by food poverty and 80% would support expanding FSM eligibility².

The high levels of child food insecurity we are seeing now are likely to be further compounded by the huge financial strain on low-income families this winter, with the £20 cut to Universal Credit, growing food and fuel prices and the forthcoming rise in National

¹ These estimates are not mutually exclusive – they can't be added together to give total number of food insecure children. Children in the UK, aged 17 and under. From surveys conducted by YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 6,490 UK households. Fieldwork was undertaken between 4th – 9th August 2021. The survey was carried out online.

² YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,633 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 12th - 18th August 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all adults living in England (aged 18+).

Food Foundation CIO

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Insurance. 55% of households with children report being worried that not being able to afford their energy or food bills will directly affect their children's health and wellbeing³.

We know England lags behind its devolved counterparts on Free School Meal policy. The Scottish Government's recent commitment to providing free lunches and breakfast to all primary pupils shows a clear understanding of the importance of school food, while Northern Ireland's Free School Meals eligibility criteria have long been set nearly twice as high as that of England.

While we recognise that there is huge pressure on public expenditure, increasing eligibility of free school meals will cost about £550 million per year, a tiny fraction of the overall education budget and of the amount the NHS spends on dealing with the worst effects of poor diets. Investing now is a vital part of the Covid recovery for disadvantaged children and will ensure precious health and education spending goes further.

As we emerge from Covid-19, Government has a clear opportunity to deliver on its levelling up agenda: this must start with ensuring all children have equal access to a healthy diet. It is therefore vital that Government does what's right and expands the Free School Meals scheme, to ensure that children living below the poverty line are given a genuine nutritional safety net. We will continue to encourage the Government to expand the scheme before even more families reach crisis point.

About The Food Foundation

The [Food Foundation](#) is a charity working to influence food policy and business practice, shaping a sustainable food system which makes healthy diets affordable and accessible for all. We work in partnership with researchers, campaigners, community bodies, industry, investors, government and citizens to galvanise the UK's diverse agents of change, using surprising and inventive ideas to drive fundamental shifts in our food system. These efforts are based on the continual re-evaluation of opportunities for action, building and synthesising strong evidence, convening powerful coalitions, harnessing citizens' voices and delivering impactful communications.

Registered Charity Number 1187611

³ Data collected by Focaldata from a nationally representative sample of 1587 parents of children aged 0-17 between 27th – 28th September 2021 using its proprietary data collection platform FDCore. Focaldata is a research data company that has been at the forefront of using the latest data collection software and machine learning based techniques to estimate public opinion.

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