

Dear Prime Minister,

We are public health experts. We know what it takes for people to be healthy. Ensuring all children receive good nutrition is vital for a healthy generation. We are writing to urge you to extend Free School Meals to all school children, phased in by extending Free School Meals to children from households on Universal Credit as a first step. Together, we can build a society where all children can thrive, no matter where they grow up.

Your priorities for this government include halving inflation and growing the economy. The government also aims to halve childhood obesity and grow a healthy generation. Investing in quality school food for all will address all of these aims.

We agree with you that we must “build the health workforce of the future”.¹ At the same time we must build the health of our citizens. That’s why we also agree with you that “prevention must be a central principle in delivering a sustainable NHS and levelling up.”² As with any preventative measure, the earlier the intervention, the better the outcome. School food presents an unrivalled opportunity to support an entire generation with quality nutrition for 190 days of the year.

Children’s health is dependent on their food. It is no coincidence that, while healthier food is over twice the price of unhealthy food per calorie, the poorest in society are most likely to have diet-related ill health.³ Fewer than two in every 100 packed lunches meet school nutrition standards.⁴ We are seeing high levels of tooth decay and stunted growth⁵. Research has found that providing school food for all reduces childhood obesity more than comparable interventions.⁶ Assuring children good health gives them the best chance at staying healthy in later life.

Free School Meals is not only a policy which is hugely beneficial for our nation’s health but is also a priority for your target voters. Over half of prospective Conservative voters (53%) are in favour of extending free school meals immediately to all children from families receiving Universal Credit, followed by a future expansion to all school children, and 82% of prospective Labour voters. The majority of the public (71%), including both Conservative and Labour voters, think the current income threshold is inadequate or should not exist at all.⁷ Expansion of free school meals to all makes economic sense: PwC estimates such an investment will pay for itself in one decade and generate around £100 billion for our economy over twenty years. This will return £1.71 for every £1 invested.⁸

¹ [Prime Minister's Speech Launching the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan, June 30, 2023](#)

² [Cabinet Office, Department of Health & Social Care, Prime Minister’s Office, \(2022\). *Build Back Better: Our Plan for Health and Social Care.*](#)

³ [The Food Foundation, \(2023\). *The Broken Plate 2023.*](#)

⁴ [Evans C.E.L., Melia K.E., Rippin H.L., et al, \(2020\). *A repeated cross-sectional survey assessing changes in diet and nutrient quality of English primary school children’s packed lunches between 2006 and 2016.* *BMJ Open* 2020;10:e029688.](#)

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https://www.foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/TFF_The%20Broken%20Plate%202023_Digital_FINAL_1.pdf

⁶ [Holford, A. and Rabe B., \(2022\) *Impacts of Local Authority Universal Free School Meal schemes on Child Obesity and Household Food Expenditure.* MiSoC Explainer.](#)

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<https://www.foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/new-data-labour-and-conservative-voters-overwhelmingly-back-giving-free-school-meals>

⁸ [Impact on Urban Health, \(2022\). *Expanding free school meals: a cost benefit analysis.*](#)

Ensuring all children can enjoy a school meal, no matter where they live, can reduce inequality both during childhood, and for the rest of their lives. This has been realised in Sweden, where a groundbreaking study showed providing all children with healthy meals led to pupils on average having a 3% higher lifetime income. This number jumps to nearly 6% for the poorest pupils, meaning the benefits of this intervention extend across the lifetime of a generation.⁹ Boosting the lifetime income of the poorest would be a key step in fulfilling the Levelling Up agenda.

Investing in nutritious school meals will provide invaluable returns to public health, healthcare and the economy. We urge you to take on board our recommendation as an election priority and would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss this further.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Camilla Kingdon, President of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health

William Roberts, Chief Executive of Royal Society for Public Health

Professor David Strain, Chair BMA Board of Science Committee

Professor Kevin Fenton, President of the Faculty of Public Health

Eddie Crouch, Chair of the British Dental Association

Liz Stockley, CEO of The British Dietetic Association

Sharon White OBE, CEO the School and Public Health Nurses Association (SAPHNA)

Dr Christoffer van Tulleken, Academic and BBC broadcaster

Dr Adam Kay former doctor and author

Dr Naomi Maynard, Feeding Liverpool

Matthew Philpott, Executive Director, Health Equalities Group

Martin Drewry, CEO of Health Poverty Action

Anna Garrod, Policy & Influencing Director, Impact on Urban Health

Professor Maria Bryant, UKRI Fix our Food, and Food and Healthy Weight theme for the UK Prevention Research Partnership: ActEarly Research Collaborative

Professor Kate E Pickett, Academic Director of Health Equity North, University of York.

Dr Nicola Heslehurst, Chair of the UK Association for the Study of Obesity

Professor Wendy Wills, Professor of Food and Public Health, University of Hertfordshire;
Professor Rebecca O'Connell and Dr Laura Hamilton, Centre for Research in Public Health and Community Care(CRIPACC), University of Hertfordshire.

⁹ <https://academic.oup.com/restud/article/89/2/876/6273674?login=true>

Heather Brown, Professor of Health Inequalities, University of Lancaster

Councillor Lynne Caffrey, Chair Gateshead Health and Wellbeing Board

Emma Rigby, Chief Executive, Association for Young People's Health

Professor Charlotte Hardman, Institute of Population Health, University of Liverpool

Katharine Jenner, Director of Obesity Health Alliance

Matthew Taylor, CEO NHS Confederation

Gwen Hines, CEO, Save the Children UK

Kristin Bash, Chair of the Yorkshire & Humber ADPH Food Systems Network