

A Better Deal for Free School Meals

A research project on Free School Meals by secondary school students

Technical Appendix

The Free School Meal (FSM) allowance project, *A Better Deal for Free School Meals*, explored the research question:

Is the FSM allowance enough for students to be able to buy tasty, healthy and sustainable food at school

This project was undertaken by the Food Foundation and the University of York as part of the [FixOurFood](#) programme. The project was funded by The Nuffield Foundation, and the UKRI Transforming UK Food Systems Strategic Priorities Fund.

Sample

Seven schools with a range of characteristics (rurality, area deprivation, catering provision) were recruited from around Yorkshire, with six students recruited from each school to be young researchers. Schools were asked to recruit students who were aged 13 – 16. In order to avoid potential stigmatisation of participants, there was no requirement for students to be in receipt of Free School Meals, and this information was not collected.

Methods

A research study incorporating a mixture of approaches, underpinned by meaningful involvement with young people. There were several components of the research.

1) Research in schools

Training workshop

The young researchers were brought together at York University for a training workshop on 14th March 2023. This was led by academics from the schools team on the FixOurFood programme and Food Foundation staff. The workshop involved the following:

- a. What is research?
- b. Background to the project
- c. Research methods (food diary, audio recordings, field notes)
- d. Thinking ahead – possible issues and how to solve them

A research folder was provided to each participant, and a Dictaphone to each school.

Research week

The research week took place 20th – 24th March 2023. The equivalent of the FSM allowance for that school was added to the online accounts of each student each day for a week.

Each day the students were tasked to try and choose the tastiest, healthiest and most sustainable food that they could, within the restrictions placed on them by the FSM allowance. They noted their choices in their research folder, along with prices, why they choose the items that they did, and whether they thought the food was tasty, healthy and sustainable.

At the end of every lunchtime the group of young researchers gathered to record a short discussion about the research.

2) Focus groups

Two researchers visited each school in the month following the research week. They ate a school lunch with the young researchers, observed the canteen and dining halls, and spoke with catering staff. An hour-long focus group was undertaken with the young researchers. A topic guide was used and the discussions were recorded. Field notes were taken by the researchers.

3) Analysis

The data from the research folders was coded and put into a spreadsheet. The daily discussions undertaken during research week and the focus groups were transcribed.

A thematic analysis was undertaken of the data from the daily discussion sessions and the focus groups. This was undertaken by two researchers, separately, to verify accuracy. The data on food choices that were collected in the research folders by the young researchers were analysed based on contribution to different food categories / contribution to a portion of vegetables. The young researchers and school staff were consulted on the findings and the recommendations.

The findings are presented in the following report: [*A Better Deal for Free School Meals*](#)

November 2023