

A BETTER DEAL FOR FREE SCHOOL MEALS

A
research
project by
secondary
school
students



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Background

The Food Foundation and FixOurFood set out to look at whether the allowance provided to students on Free School Meals (FSM) is enough for them to buy healthy, tasty and sustainable food at school. This report presents what a group of young researchers in secondary school learnt when they undertook research in their schools, and extends our knowledge in relation to the adequacy of the FSM allowance. In addition to answering the question about the FSM allowance adequacy, the young researchers also shared their thoughts and experiences on many other aspects of food in their schools, thus providing additional insights about the school food environment. This report sheds a light on the daily experiences within the school food system of those who receive FSM. Researched and written with young people, it is crucial reading for anyone interested in food in schools.

“ I wanted the school to be involved as I was concerned about the number of students on FSM who were not using all their daily allowance due to lack of clear pricing as well as not being able to combine some food combinations. I wanted all students to be able to have a healthy meal which would help them stay well and ensure they had the opportunity to choose a variety of dishes.”

VAL CLAYDEN, HEAD OF KEY STAGE 4, BEDALE HIGH SCHOOL, NORTH YORKSHIRE

Why is this research important?

Every school day, over 100,000 school cooks and caterers serve school meals to millions of children. With pupils spending 190 days of the year in school, food in schools plays a critical role in providing children with the nourishment they need to grow, learn and thrive. There is strong evidence to show that, when done well, school meals can significantly improve health and educational outcomes¹. Food at school is particularly important for children who are eligible for a FSM.



Today, in England, all children in Reception through to Year 2 enjoy a FSM, 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. Despite the restrictive eligibility criteria, more than 2 million children in England are eligible for a means-tested FSM². This means around 1 in 4 school students receives a FSM. About a third of a child's food intake happens during the school day³, so for many children, FSM are an important opportunity to improve access to a healthy, tasty meal, five days a week. For many, this may be their only chance to have a hot meal each day. The amount of food consumed in schools up and down the country every day means that school food plays a significant part in the wider food system, and so can make a big impact on the environment.

Many caterers have criticised the funding allocation for school meals as being insufficient to cover mounting food, utility and staff costs in a cost-of-living crisis⁴. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, funding for FSM has not kept pace with inflation. Since 2014, the per-meal funding rate has lost 16% of its value in real terms. If it had increased in line with inflation as measured by the Consumer Prices Index, the per-meal allocation would now be £2.87⁵.

“ Eating the food in that budget it gives you a lack of energy for the rest of the day; when you're doing the lesson it's hard to focus, and you feel a bit more hungry.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER

Take home messages

- The current allowance is not sufficient for students to be able to choose the healthiest and most sustainable food in school.
- Students receiving FSM are not able to afford snacks or a drink at breaktime as well as lunch. Not being able to get any food until lunchtime can mean young people get very hungry during the morning lessons, particularly if they have not eaten breakfast.
- Not having the same choices as their peers can make students feel excluded and stigmatised.
- Funding and capacity pressures on schools impact on food experiences for students, particularly those restricted to the FSM allowance. Issues include:
 - » **Not being able to access free drinking water easily because water fountains are broken.**
 - » **Short lunch breaks with long queues for food.**

Understanding how the FSM allowance works in practice

- All schools use cashless payment systems, whereby students have an account that is topped-up by parents. If a student is registered for FSM, the allowance is added to the account automatically.
- Schools normally offer a 'meal deal' priced at the level of the FSM allowance allocation to get a main, a pudding and usually a drink.
- In most cases, if they do not want to get the meal deal, students can purchase single items (such as sandwiches, drinks, pizza, sweet items).
- Any money that is not spent that day – for example if you are off sick, or fasting for Ramadan – is not rolled over to the next day's allowance. This means children are not able to choose to save a bit one day to spend more the next.
- Students receive different allowances in different schools (see Box 1). For this research, the allowances varied from £2.15 to £2.70. In many schools, the allowance is not added to their account until after morning breaktime.



BOX 1

HOW FSM FUNDING WORKS

The exact allowance provided for a Free School Meal (FSM) varies from school to school. Below is a simplification of a complex funding process that explains this variation.

Government: The Government sets the criteria for who is entitled to FSM via education and social security laws, and sets the rate via the National Funding Formula. The current recommended FSM allowance per pupil for the year is £480. This amounts to £2.53 per pupil per day.

Local Authority: Local authorities (LA) (or Multi-Academy Trusts) receive funding based on the number of pupils registered for FSM. They agree the local rate for FSM through a Schools Forum. This may be different to the amount allocated in the National Funding Formula, e.g. they may decide to allocate more or less than £2.53 per day.

Education Setting: Schools / colleges receive funding from the LA or Multi-Academy Trusts based on the number of pupils registered for FSM, and agree the price with their catering teams.

SOURCE: BREMNER AND CO.

“ *The dinner staff are really supportive about it ... I got pasta [which is £1.75 so you can't afford anything else] and they were like, 'Oh just get a cake, it's fine, I'll let you off.'* **”**
 YOUNG RESEARCHER

What we learnt from the young researchers

What food did the young researchers report that they used their FSM allowance to buy over the week of research?

In **4** out of **7** schools **NO FRUIT WAS PURCHASED** by the young researchers over the **entire week**



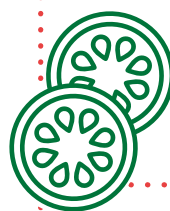
On one day in the week, **NOT A SINGLE PORTION OF FRUIT WAS PURCHASED** by any of the young researchers (7 schools and 42 young researchers)



If we exclude tomato sauce (i.e. on a pizza), **OVER HALF THE LUNCHES PURCHASED** by the young researchers were not recorded to contain **ANY VEGETABLES**

OVER 1/3 of the lunches purchased included a

- BAGUETTE
- SANDWICH
- PANINI
- WRAP



'Tomato'/'tomato sauce' made up **31%** of all the **VEGETABLES RECORDED**

16 out of the **158** LUNCHES CONTAINED FISH, which was consumed either as **fish and chips** or **tuna baguette**

Of the **158** lunches recorded, nearly a **QUARTER** included **PIZZA**



Barriers to accessing healthy and sustainable food for students receiving FSM

The young researchers reported that food was often tasty, but that a number of issues got in the way of them being able to access the healthiest and most sustainable food at school. We outline these issues below.

1 RESTRICTED CHOICES >>

We found that being restricted to only spending the FSM allowance meant that students were more limited than their peers in terms of what they could choose to eat, and also in their ability to choose the healthiest and most sustainable options.

In every school, students who receive FSM were able to buy a ‘meal deal’, which included a hot main meal, a sweet item and in most cases, a drink. The meal deals were always set at the level of the FSM allowance for that school, i.e. they were cheaper than buying each of the items individually.

Other products, such as wraps, paninis, sweet items and drinks, were available, but the price of a single item might mean that a student restricted to spending the FSM allowance could only afford one thing (see **Box 2**).



BOX 2

HOW MEAL DEALS WORK

If the allowance in the school is £2.50, the meal deal might provide you with fish, chips and beans, a flapjack, and a bottle of water. When bought alone, a flapjack might cost 60p and water 80p. If you wanted a slice of pizza, and it cost £2, you couldn't then afford either a sweet item or a drink.

In most cases there was a choice of two main courses for the meal deal, with one of them often being jacket potatoes. In some schools, students receiving FSM were restricted to getting the meal deal and were not allowed to choose other single items that were being offered, such as panini or wraps. This policy was in place to try and ensure that students were purchasing a full, balanced meal with their allowance. In most schools, students were able to buy single items, but as noted above the price of these items meant they had no money left to buy anything else. Some single items were priced at more than the allowance. This meant that in order to afford a main, a sweet item and a drink, students limited to spending the allowance had to get the meal deal, and as such, had a restricted choice.

“ I just prefer to get more colder stuff ... I just prefer stuff like that for lunch.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER

BOX 3

A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

In one school there are no single items for sale – all students have to choose one of three meals (main – pudding – drink), which are set at the level of the allowance. This means that students receiving FSM have exactly the same experience as those who are paying for a meal.

Only being able to spend the FSM allowance also restricted students' ability to choose the healthiest options. In one school, the dishes available as part of the meal deal always contained two portions of vegetables. However, this was not the case in every school; usually only one portion of vegetables or a side salad was offered. Other healthy items such as individual salads or little pots of grapes or chopped fruit were sometimes available, but they were not always included in the meal deal. With the FSM allowance it wasn't possible to buy them in addition to the meal deal, or alongside a single item such as a wrap. Our young researchers told us that they didn't want to buy just a salad on its own, as this would not be enough to fill them up for the afternoon.

“ Doesn't really fill you up to the end of the school day.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER

WHAT WE LEARNT FROM THE YOUNG RESEARCHERS

2 BREAKTIMES >>



BOX 4

ENSURING A GREAT START FOR ALL

One school didn't sell any snacks at breaktime, but provided free, substantial breakfasts before school started for all students.

We learned that students receiving FSM were usually not allowed to spend their allowance at breaktime. In most schools, the allowance did not get added to their account until after morning break. Catering staff explained that this policy aims to support students to spend their allowance on a healthy lunch⁹. If students had control over when they could spend their allowance and purchased food at break, this meant that they then couldn't afford the lunchtime meal deal or the larger items such as wraps or panini.

“ If you're on FSM and you went up at break, they'd just turn you away; they wouldn't even consider giving you anything.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER

The young researchers reported that many students (not just those receiving FSM) were often hungry by breaktime. This was sometimes because they hadn't had any breakfast, but also because it is a long time until lunchtime; sometimes over four hours from their arrival at school. They described how being hungry affected their ability to concentrate during lessons.

“ Say you don't have breakfast, then you're still gonna be hungry, and then you go home and have very little. It's like a repeat on never having enough food.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER

“ Because we can't get snacks at breaktime, that doesn't take me to lunch, so I get hungry in the morning.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER

The young researchers explained that not being able to buy snacks at breaktime, unlike their peers, can make students feel excluded and stigmatised.



3 THE IMPORTANCE OF CLEAR PRICING FOR THOSE RESTRICTED TO THE FSM ALLOWANCE >>

The young researchers explained that it was not always easy to work out the cost of their food choices, as up-to-date menus were sometimes not available, and not all food items were priced. Sometimes the prices were available at the point of selection (e.g. a menu on a wall or individually labelled items), but they described how this could place pressure on them to make quick choices, and it sometimes felt stressful because they had a limited amount to spend. The time pressure also made it more difficult to be able to consider what would be the healthiest, most sustainable option within the budget available.

“ ... there's a lot of pressure when we're trying to choose foods and it's difficult to choose quickly and not hold up the line.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER

“ You've still got to look, guess and pay and that's how it goes, you've got no more time to think would that fill me? Would that fill me? Which one do I like more? It's sort of just I see that, I'm going to have it, it's in my budget, that's it.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER

WHAT WE LEARNT FROM THE YOUNG RESEARCHERS

Students on FSM are sometimes allowed to spend more than their daily allowance, and the extra that is spent is taken off their allocation for the following day, which means they have less to spend, and can't afford a full meal deal. However, we also learnt that, on occasion, if chosen items added up to more than the allowance, some students were asked to put items back. This can be very embarrassing.

“ It feels pretty bad [when asked to put food back as not enough money] ... it makes you feel kinda sad that you can't have it, because usually you get it because you're hungry, and then you can't get it, so you get even more hungry.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER

“ I felt embarrassed ... because there are other people that are waiting in line right behind you, like 'I'm here to get the food that I can afford.'”

YOUNG RESEARCHER



Where students do not have access to a menu, they often rely on their memory to predict what was on offer, and this usually worked because menus are often repeated. However, this can lead to confusion when unexpected changes to the menu occur.

“ Sometimes they say we have memorised what we have on Monday and Tuesday and Friday. Like on Tuesday we have pizza and Wednesday we have burger. But like yesterday we didn't have the pizza, so, we'd be so confused, we don't know what we have. And my friend at the back, she'd be like, 'What are we having then?' And then I have to look and tell her.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER

4 SUSTAINABILITY >>

In terms of the sustainability of the food on offer, the young researchers discussed the amount of vegetables and vegetarian options available. They observed that there was a lack of vegetables – including vegetables served in meals – and vegetarian-based meals, and a lack of variability in the types of vegetables used in salads. In instances where vegetarian meals were served, the young researchers reported that students did not always find them tasty.

The young researchers also reported that there was not very much fruit available. In 4 out of 7 schools, no fruit was eaten by the young researchers over the entire week. This is another way in which the FSM allowance may be restricting access to healthy options for students. In many cases, fruit was not an option in the meal deal; nor was it offered as an alternative to the sweet option, which, in many cases, was a tray bake, such as brownies or flapjacks. Where individual pieces of fruit were available to purchase, they were often not prominently displayed.

“ I had a jacket potato today with biscuit and flavoured water. I don't think it was really sustainable or very healthy because there was no fruit or veg included.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER

Wider issues relating to accessing healthy and sustainable food at schools

When we visited each school and met with the young researchers to discuss the research that they had undertaken, additional themes emerged which touched on factors wider than the FSM allowance itself. In this section, we present some of the issues that were discussed in relation to the food that is available in school and the lunchtime experience – these impact not only those young

people receiving FSM but the whole student community. The context of these issues is the pressures that schools are currently facing. These include the cuts to funding which have seen a fall in spending per pupil in real terms by 9% in the decade from 2009/10⁹, and the increased prioritisation of performance and standards¹⁰.

1 ACCESS TO FREE WATER AND GETTING ENOUGH TO DRINK >>

English School Food Standards require that ‘free, fresh drinking water must be available at all times’¹¹. This is particularly important for students receiving FSM, who often rely on and are limited to the drinks that they can buy at lunchtime, usually as part of the meal deal. Although all schools had free water available, young researchers reported that sometimes water fountains were broken or located in areas that students could not easily access. Where jugs of water were available in the lunch hall, the young researchers told us that students do not trust them to be clean, and so don’t use them, and that there are often concerns about the cleanliness of the water fountains too.

“ There’s a water fountain but it’s often broken and sometimes the water comes out gross.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER

“ We have a water fountain in the cafeteria, but it’s broken. It still hasn’t been fixed yet.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER

“ I think it’s more when you’re paying for water bottles, you’re more paying not only for the plastic but also for the privacy of it. Because with our water fountains, you have like a massive jug of water like next to it that the water dispenses out of, but you can like access it. So, if someone wanted to, they could like put something in that water.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER

As outlined earlier, in order to be able to afford a main course, sweet item and a drink, young people receiving FSM have to get the meal deal. The choice of drinks that come with a meal deal is often limited, and the young researchers explained that students would like to have the same choices as their peers who have fewer financial restrictions. They recognised the importance of being well hydrated during the school day, and highlighted the issue of not being able to buy a drink at breaktime.

“ I do think that it is maybe a little bit ridiculous, the fact that you can’t get a drink when a lot of people need to drink water more than they need to eat food during the day.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER



2 SHORT LUNCH BREAKS ARE A BARRIER TO STUDENTS CHOOSING HEALTHIER OPTIONS >>

Due to pressures to cover the curriculum, schools have increased teaching time¹², and the length of school lunch breaks in the UK has been significantly reduced since 2006¹³. Among the schools taking part in the project, five schools had a lunch break of 30 minutes, one had a break of 35 minutes and one had a 25-minute break. The young researchers explained that this is usually not enough time to queue for lunch, sit and eat, and socialise. The issue of having to wait in long queues to buy food was raised by many of the young researchers. This can be frustrating, but also impacts on the food choices students make, and can even lead to some young people opting out of having school dinners altogether.

“ Yeah. And also some kids just want to have a break instead of just eating ...”

YOUNG RESEARCHER 1

“ So some kids just won’t eat.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER 2 (REPLYING)



Schools often have a counter for hot meals and another for cold items. The hot food offered as part of the meal deal usually adheres to School Food Standards and will be served with at least one vegetable. If the queue is too long, young researchers told us that students would often go to the other servery with a shorter queue, to pick up a wrap or a slice of pizza. This gives them more time to relax with friends but may not be a balanced meal, and may not contain any vegetables at all. The young researchers explained that this impacts on students receiving FSM because if they do not want to wait in the long queue for the hot meal deal, they can often only afford one item from the ‘grab and go’ section, and this may not be enough to fill them up.

Another way in which the short lunch break may impact on diet quality is that they also choose ‘grab and go’ items such as wraps or pizza slices (which is what was eaten in 1 out of every 4 meals during the week of research) that are served for the most part in a napkin. These items can be eaten without cutlery or a plate, and this means students do not have to sit in the often-noisy lunch hall to eat, but can have some time outside or somewhere else. What this means, however, is that if salad is available, they won’t take any as they would have to have a plate and sit down.

We heard that sometimes, because of the short lunch period and the long queues, young people just don’t have time to finish eating what they have purchased, and this then leads to food wastage.

“ Yeah, because some people perhaps they throw out the food because they don’t have enough time to eat it all.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER

“ ... she went to go get her food and it was at the end of like when we go back to class and she didn’t have any time to eat. So she had to go chuck all of her food in the bin.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER



3 OTHER SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES >>

The young researchers were asked to think about sustainability in relation to food packaging as well as what they believed to be the sustainability of the food on offer. In all but one of the schools, the food was served in disposable packaging, and the cutlery was also disposable. In some cases, the packaging was recyclable and the cutlery was made out of products other than plastic, but none of the schools had recycling bins and so all of it was put into general waste, i.e. sent to landfill. Many schools had introduced disposable tableware as a necessary response to Covid-19, and had not yet returned to reusable plates and cutlery.

“The bad thing about this school is we don’t recycle.”
YOUNG RESEARCHER

The number of plastic bottles bought and thrown away every day is of real concern to the young researchers, and they reported that most of their peers purchase a bottle per school day. One group of young researchers were working with their school on this issue, and had calculated that around 55,000 plastic bottles were thrown away every year at their school. Indeed, if 50% of pupils buy a drink every day in a school with 1,000 pupils, and there are no recycling bins, this could mean 500 plastic bottles a day - 2,500 a week - are being thrown away.

“Technically you don’t have to pay for water; there’s a water fountain. But most people buy water and then scrap the bottle so that they can’t use the water fountain, so they end up constantly spending their money on water bottles.”
YOUNG RESEARCHER

YOUNG RESEARCHER

While schools are restricted by limited funding and capacity, they are making positive changes where they can. There was one report of water being served in glasses, the removal of plastic packaging from desserts and an increase in paper packaging.

Recommendations

In order that secondary school students receiving FSM are able to choose tasty, healthy and sustainable food at schools, national Government should:

“If they changed it to maybe you get money in your account weekly because then you’ll get more choice on whether you want to have ... like if you’re more hungry on another day than you are other, or if you have PE where you’d 100% want a water bottle because you’d going to need some water for exercising, so if it was weekly then you could make that decision yourself instead of having it made for you.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER

- Mandate that all FSM funding passed from local authorities or Multi-Academy Trusts to schools is ring-fenced for school meal provision.
- Amend the School Food Standards to include:
 - » A requirement to offer two or more portions of vegetables with every meal. This would bring English Standards in line with those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
 - » Ensure that ‘grab and go’ items (e.g. sandwiches and pizza) include a portion of vegetables.
- Roll out a nationwide monitoring system to support compliance with School Food Standards.
- Introduce a ‘water-only’ recommendation for all schools. Ensure schools have adequate funding to provide and maintain water fountains.
- Extend the School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme to all year groups, up to and including Year 11.
- Provide support for schools to be able to recycle food packaging in line with the Department for Education’s *Sustainability and climate change: a strategy for the education and children’s services systems*.

“If it was like there was just apples, bananas, oranges and pears and they were 50p each at break and then maybe at lunchtime, I think they’d probably get eaten quite a lot because ... they’d be so cheap.”

YOUNG RESEARCHER

What schools can do to support students receiving the FSM allowance

It is clear that school and catering staff have the best interests of their students at heart and want to ensure that they eat enough and as well as they can. Some schools give out leftover sandwiches at the end of the day; teachers organise lunch for students if there



is a problem with money on their account; lunchtime supervisors have let people have a pudding if it is just a little bit over their allowance. All of the schools that took part in the project were keen to hear about ways to improve the experiences of their students.

In order to improve the experience of students receiving FSM, schools (and caterers where appropriate) should:

- Ensure that all items are priced clearly and that up-to-date menus are available online and in school, to enable students to make a decision before the point of purchase.
- Provide flexibility on when the FSM allowance can be spent throughout the school day, and allow unspent allowance to be accrued on a student’s account.
- Reduce disposable food packaging, in order to work towards a more sustainable school food system.

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- ² <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>
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- ⁴ <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/infant-free-school-meals-funding-rises-by-5-but-still-falls-short>
- ⁵ <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/policy-menu-school-lunches-options-and-trade-offs-expanding-free-school-meals-england>
- ⁶ See <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/childrens-right2food> for more information on The Food Foundation's Young Food Ambassadors.
- ⁷ This research (HSRGC/2022/258/B: FSM Allowance Project) was reviewed and approved by the Health Sciences' Research Governance Committee of the University of York.
- ⁸ This was the explanation given by catering staff, but also outlined in a response provided by Nick Gibb, Minister of State at the Department for Education, as to the premise behind the existing FSM allowance levels. See <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-06-16/189943>
- ⁹ <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/2021-annual-report-education-spending-england>
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- ¹³ Baines, E. and Blatchford, P. (2019). School break and lunch times and young people's social lives: A follow-up national study. Executive Summary. UCL Institute of Education

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 multi-stakeholder partnerships. We are independent of all political parties and business, and we are not limited by a single issue or special interest. Our Children's Right2Food Campaign is a nationwide initiative led by young people to ensure every child in the UK can access and afford good food.

www.foodfoundation.org.uk



About FixOurFood

FixOurFood is a 5-year research programme led by the University of York and is part of the 'Transforming the UK Food System for Healthy People and a Healthy Environment Strategic Priorities Fund Programme' which is delivered by UKRI. FixOurFood has a vision to transform food systems across the UK towards being 'regenerative'. We are working in schools and nurseries to transform food menus, environments, education and procurement. FixOurFood is evidence-based and we are committed to all young people having a voice in the future of the UK food system.

www.fixourfood.org



About The Nuffield Foundation

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare and Justice. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder 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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