

# Why the Government must extend Free School Meals to more children

## SUMMARY

Free School Meals ensure children are guaranteed at least one hot, healthy meal a day. There is strong evidence that this improves children's health as well as academic performance and future economic prosperity.

The restrictively low household income threshold of £7,400 means that there are currently 900,000 children living in poverty in England who are not eligible of a free school meal.

The Government must take steps to ensure all school children receive a nutritious free school meal at lunch time. As an urgent first step, eligibility should be extended to all families in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent benefits.

## Making school meals fairer

- School children are only eligible for a free hot meal at lunchtime if their household income is below £7,400 per year after tax. This threshold has not increased since 2018, despite other benefits increasing in line with inflation.
- As a result, [900,000 children in England](#) do not meet the Free School Meal eligibility criteria despite their household income being so low that they are classed as living in poverty.
- Eligibility is much lower than is commonly believed by the public. The majority of the public (71%) think the current [income threshold is inadequate](#) or should not exist at all.
- England's school meal eligibility threshold is the most restrictive of all the devolved nations. Scotland and Wales are in the process of introducing Free School Meals for all children in primary schools while Northern Ireland's eligibility threshold is twice that of England's (£14,000 before tax and benefits).
- In London, all primary school children have been eligible for Free School Meals since September 2023 and this has recently been extended to include the 2024-25 academic year.
- This means that most primary school children in England are missing out and are not getting the same level of support as children in other parts of the UK. This could further drive regional inequalities.

## The benefits of Free School Meals

### Improved children's nutrition and health:

- School meals guarantee that children receive a nutritious hot meal. This is different to packed lunches, of which [fewer than 2%](#) meet School Food Standards.
- [Studies in London boroughs](#) where all children are guaranteed a free hot meal show a reduction in obesity in Reception children of 9.3%. This is significant given that [one in three children](#) leave primary school with obesity, with children living in lower income areas twice as likely to be affected.

### Reduced food insecurity:

- [1 in 5 households with children](#) are experiencing food insecurity.
- Expanding free school meal eligibility criteria would assure children one nutritionally balanced hot meal per day and take significant pressure off increasingly tight family budgets.

### Increased attainment, attendance and earning potential:

- It is incredibly difficult for children to learn if they are hungry. Guaranteeing children a meal helps improve academic performance and reduces absenteeism.
- The Department for Education's Universal Free School Meal pilot [showed improved academic attainment](#) with most benefit in deprived groups.
- [Research from Sweden](#) has found that pupils who receive Free School Meals earn an extra 3% on average over their lifetimes – rising to 6% among the poorest.
- A 2023 report by the [Education Select Committee](#) on attendance highlighted low income as one of the major drivers of poor attendance, emphasising the need to tackle child poverty to address the problem. The Committee heard from the Association for Young People's Health and Ofsted, that the availability of a free meal at lunchtime has a positive

attendance effect. The Committee therefore recommended that the eligibility criteria for Free School Meals should be expanded to ensure all children in poverty receive a hot meal at lunchtime.

## The economics of Free School Meals

- [Research commissioned by Impact on Urban Health](#) and conducted by PwC has found expanding Free School Meal eligibility in line with Universal Credit (or equivalent benefits) would return £1.38 for every £1 that was invested and £1.71 per £1 invested if the policy was expanded to all children.
- Extending Free School Meals in line with Universal Credit (or equivalent benefits) would cost an additional £477 million per annum initially, with 1.3 million additional school children seeing immediate benefit. Costs in subsequent years are projected to gradually reduce, in line with projected population changes.
- This would also enable families to be better off, foregoing the daily charge of paying for school lunches - especially welcome to many amidst the cost of living crisis.

## Level of support for expanding Free School Meals among voters

- Commitments from political parties on doing more to ensure children receive a free hot meal at lunch time would sway swing voters according to [research conducted by Public First](#).
- **82% of Labour voters and over half (53%) of Conservative voters are in favour** of immediately extending free school meals to all children from families receiving Universal Credit, followed by a future expansion to all school children. 68% of all respondents agreed this would be a good use of Government money.
- Respondents were asked how their vote in future would be affected by the Labour Party adopting a policy to extend Free School Meals to all children on Universal Credit immediately, and in the long-term to all school children, before the subsequent general election:
  - o 65% of prospective Labour voters would be more likely to vote for the party, as well as 64% of 2019 Labour voters.
  - o 23% of 2019 Conservative voters and 18% of those who intend to vote Conservative at the next election would be more likely to switch to Labour.
  - o Undecided voters would be far more likely to vote Labour, if Labour supported extending Free School Meals.
- Widening provision of Free School Meals is seen by voters as one of the top four ways for a Government to support families in the cost of living crisis (after energy bill assistance, increasing minimum wage and providing affordable housing).

## What change do we want to see?

**The current system is not working with 900,000 children living in poverty but not having access to a free school meal. As an urgent first step, these children must be provided with a free school meal.**

**Ensuring that school pupils receive a free hot, nutritious meal at lunch time is essential for helping all children learn and giving them the start in life that they deserve. The benefits of providing a free school meal to children's health are significant and universal, particularly in relation to childhood obesity. We must therefore reach a position that that all children, regardless of their background, are provided with a free school meal.**

**As the UK approaches a General Election, The Food Foundation is urging all candidates and political parties to recognise the importance of improving the food system for achieving many societal goals. The Food Foundation's manifesto 'Nourishing the Nation' presents a range of policy priorities aimed at transforming the current food system, reshaping the nation's well-being and future.**

**You can find our Nourishing the Nation manifesto [here](#).**

For further information please contact Joss MacDonald, Public Affairs Lead: [joss.macdonald@foodfoundation.org.uk](mailto:joss.macdonald@foodfoundation.org.uk)