



The

Superpowers

of

Free School

Meals

Evidence Pack
UPDATE

Spring 2025



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Acknowledgements



About Feed the Future

Feed the Future is a campaign led by members of the School Food Review coalition. With support from young campaigners, teachers and health professionals, the coalition is making the case for extending Free School Meals to more children, with an immediate extension to those most in need of the benefits that healthy school meals offer.

Visit: foodfoundation.org.uk/news/feed-future-campaign



About the School Food Review

The School Food Review is a coalition of 37 organisations spanning educational bodies, charities, caterer representatives, unions and academics. It undertakes advocacy and campaigning work to deliver positive change across the school food system. Our shared vision is that every child, regardless of where they live, should have the same opportunity to access and enjoy nutritious, delicious and sustainable school food so they are able to concentrate and are ready to learn.

Visit: schoolfoodmatters.org/school-food-review

With thanks to our funders

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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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Contributors

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Design: whitecreativecompany.co.uk



“When we feed kids well, when we act with kindness and integrity in our politics, the benefits are profound. It truly is a superpower – setting them up to get better grades, better jobs, and so putting £8.9 billion back into the economy over 20 years. Let’s hope our politicians can step up to the plate.”

JAMIE OLIVER, CHEF AND CAMPAIGNER, 2022

Executive summary

Purpose

Every child, no matter where they live, should have the same opportunity to access and enjoy nutritious, delicious and sustainable school food – at breakfast and beyond. School food has the power to enable not just better health and wellbeing, but improved attendance, better pupil outcomes and wider social benefits including reduced inequalities. Free School Meals can break down barriers to opportunity and level the playing field so that every child can have the best start in life.

This Evidence Pack was first published in 2022¹ and has been updated to reflect additional data and evidence from a range of independent sources on the power of Free School Meals. The intention is to demonstrate to a new cohort of policymakers the evidence that investment in Free School Meals makes sense socially, morally and economically.



“The will of the public is clear - parents, pupils and schools overwhelmingly support policies to expand student eligibility to Free School Meals. After the last two years of cost-of-living-crisis, we understand how school food acts as a lifeline for millions of children across the UK, securing them a hot, nutritious meal to keep them healthy and engaged at school.”

SHARON HODGSON MP, CHAIR OF THE APPG ON SCHOOL FOOD, QUOTE PROVIDED TO SUSTAIN IN 2024²

Current context

For many children, a Free School Meal (FSM) can be their main source of hot, nutritious food. But we know that provision is currently falling short: the restrictive eligibility criteria in England means some 900,000 children living below the poverty line don't qualify for a FSM.³

Today, in England, we have a universal school meal offer for children in Reception until Year 2, 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. Entitlement criteria in England greatly diverge from Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland (see map on p.9).

Since this evidence pack was first published in 2022, food insecurity continues to be a reality for many low-income families across the UK: in January 2025, 18% of households with children reported experiencing food insecurity, compared to 12% of households without children.⁴ With around 21% of schools in England now operating a food bank,⁵ and teachers reporting that children are too hungry to concentrate and learn,⁶ the case for expanding entitlement to FSM at lunchtime is as strong as ever.

We celebrate this Government's investment in children's health and education with the introduction of a free breakfast club in every primary school. However, breakfast is not a substitute for lunch and needs to be introduced alongside expanding FSMs at lunchtime.

With this Government promising to raise the healthiest generation of children ever, break down barriers to opportunity and tackle child poverty, now is the time to highlight the power of FSMs to drive real progress in achieving these aims. We believe that every child should have access to good nutrition across the whole school day. It's not right that children are missing out on the school food they need to learn and thrive because of where they live or how much their family earns.

#FeedTheFuture
is calling for Free
School Meals at
lunchtime to be
extended to all
children, beginning
with those from
families on
Universal Credit.

Introduction:

Why Every Child Needs a Full Plate

Imagine trying to focus in class while your stomach growls, your energy fades, and all you can think about is when you'll next eat. For many young people like me and my classmates, this isn't just an occasional struggle—it's a daily reality. I remember sitting next to a friend who quietly confessed she hadn't eaten since lunch the day before. She was bright, full of potential, and desperate to succeed—but hunger was an invisible weight she carried every day. I saw how it drained her energy, dulled her focus, and made even simple tasks feel impossible.

No child should have to choose between learning and wondering where their next meal will come from. Yet, thousands of children across the UK from low-income families face the daily challenge of going without a nutritious meal—damaging their ability to learn, grow, and reach their full potential.

This isn't just about lunch; it's about fairness, opportunity, and the long-term well-being of our children and our economy. Beyond the immediate need for nourishment, Free School Meals (FSM) have far-reaching benefits for individuals and society as a whole.

This report presents a compelling case for action—not merely as a response to financial pressures faced by families today but as a critical step toward long-term progress.

FSMs are more than just food on a plate—they are a lifeline; they are an equaliser. They are the tool that fuels learning, boosts health, and gives every child—no matter their background—the chance to reach their full potential. For families already stretched to their limits, a free meal at school can alleviate the pressure of struggling to pay for heating, rent and food on the table.

The evidence is overwhelming: investing in FSMs leads to better educational outcomes, improved health, and long-term economic benefits.

Expanding FSMs is one of the most powerful investments we can make for our future. Research shows that providing FSM to children from families receiving Universal Credit could add £8.9 billion in core benefits to the economy over the next 20 years by helping students achieve better grades, secure higher-paying jobs, and lead healthier lives.⁷

And expanding to families receiving Universal Credit is just the first step. Ensuring every child has access to a nutritious school meal is one of the simplest and most impactful steps we can take to tackling child poverty, breaking down barriers to opportunity and reducing health inequalities across the UK.

This evidence pack, updated with new data and case studies, presents a clear case, endorsed by civil society, teachers, medical professionals, children, and young people like me: expanding FSMs is not only a moral imperative but also a vital step for the future of our children and our economy.

The benefits of FSM are undeniable. We call on policymakers to act now and expand FSM to all children from households receiving Universal Credit as a first step towards rolling out FSM to all children in state-funded schools. Let's make sure no child goes through the school day hungry—because a nourished child is one step closer to a brighter, more successful future.

**RUSHDA
MAHMOOD,
FOOD
AMBASSADOR,
16 YEARS OLD,
FROM HALIFAX**





Free School Meals help children **THRIVE**

The policy delivers many benefits:

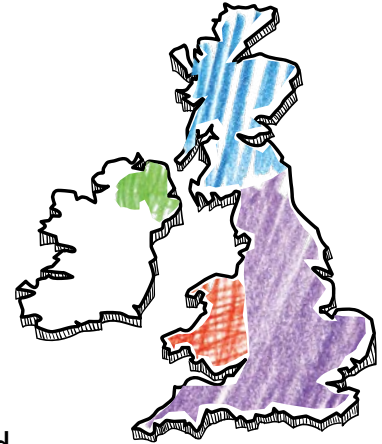
- **Boosts attainment** and attendance, and increases a child's lifetime earnings
- **Improves food security** and helps families save on food costs
- **Improves nutrition** and helps combat childhood obesity, saving the NHS money in the long term

We've seen great progress over the last few years in England

- 2014** Universal Infant Free School Meals were introduced so every child in the first three years of school has a hot, nutritious meal at lunchtime.⁸
- 2015** New School Food Standards were made mandatory to help ensure school food is nutritious and good quality.⁹
- 2022** Free School Meals were permanently extended to children from families with no recourse to public funds.¹⁰
- 2023** Sadiq Khan, London Metro Mayor, rolled out Universal Primary Free School Meals in London.¹¹
- 2023-4** Free School Meal auto-enrolment pilots carried out by a small number of councils to help children receive their Free School Meal entitlement.¹²

There's still work we need to do to make sure every child across England has access to a healthy school meal

There are still large differences between who can get a nutritious school meal across the UK nations:



ENGLAND

- » Universal Infant Free School Meals (Reception to Year 2).¹³
- » Families means-tested from Year 3 and in secondary school, with entitlement for Free School Meals set at family earnings of £7,400 (after tax, not including benefits).¹⁴
- » Free School Meals for all state-school primary-aged children are being funded across London by the Mayor.¹⁵

WALES

- » Universal provision across all primary schools.¹⁷
- » Families means-tested in secondary school with entitlement for Free School Meals set at family earnings of £7,400 (after tax, not including benefits).¹⁸

NORTHERN IRELAND

- » No Universal Infant Free School Meals.
- » Families means-tested in primary and secondary schools, with a threshold of family earnings of £15,000 (after tax, not including benefits).¹⁶

SCOTLAND

- » Free School Meals for Primary P1-5¹⁹ and for pupils in P6 and P7 from families in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment.²⁰
- » Families means-tested in secondary school with entitlement for Free School Meals set at family earnings of £9,552 (after tax, not including benefits).²¹

Where can we go from here?

Let's not stop until every child is able to eat a healthy meal at school so they can always be ready to learn and achieve their potential

Expand entitlement to Free School Meals

As an immediate first step, widen entitlement criteria in England to include all children from families in receipt of Universal Credit (or equivalent benefits) to help children most in need - an additional 1.3 million children will benefit.²²

Extend provision to all school children in primary and secondary school.

Expanding Free School Meals (FSM) will support the local economy by increasing job opportunities in the school food sector, leading to better training for staff, and driving up school food quality and uptake. Universal FSMs will remove the stigma from school food and ensure all children have an equal opportunity to thrive and be healthy.

Introduce auto-enrolment for Free School Meals

Approximately 11% of entitled children are missing out on their statutory right to a Free School Meal.²³

Auto-enrolment will ensure that all children who already meet the existing entitlement criteria receive their statutory right to a Free School Meal, unless they opt out.



The **superpowers** of **Free School Meals**

Imagine if there was something we could do that would ensure that our school children are **healthier and happier**, **do better in school**, and **earn more over their lifetime** – and that all this can come at a cost of around £2.58 per child each day?

Free School Meals have this superpower.

Children who have Free School Meals are...

... **healthier**

Children who eat Free School Meals (FSM) **consume more fruit and vegetables**.²⁴ FSM are much healthier than packed lunches: only 1.6% of packed lunches meet the Government's School Food Standards.²⁵ Packed lunches are more likely to contain confectionery, savoury snacks and sweetened drinks, and less likely to contain vegetables than FSM.

FSM can help to **reduce obesity**: providing Universal Free School Meals led to a reduction in obesity rates and a higher proportion of children within a healthy weight range in the UK.²⁶ The research on pp. 16–17 of this report provides strong further evidence of this benefit.

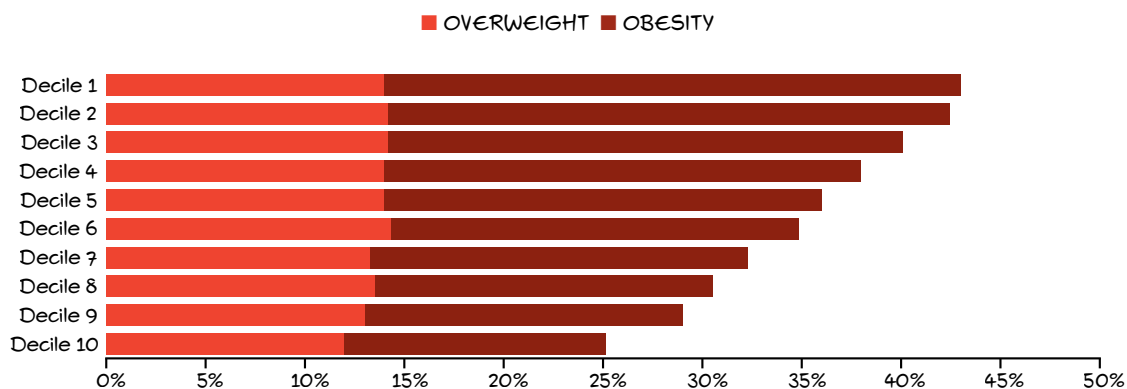
No single intervention can, on its own, create the healthy environment that is needed to ensure that all our children remain a healthy weight. But providing FSM for all is an important part of solving this issue.

FSM can also **reduce health inequalities**,²⁷ as well as improve health and wellbeing.²⁸ In London, both children and their parents saw positive impacts on their health and wellbeing as a result of the Universal Primary FSM policy.²⁹ The reductions in obesity among children receiving FSM may help to reduce the strong obesity gradient that is evident across families: the least deprived children are less likely to be living with obesity, on average, than most deprived children.⁵⁵

"I'm from Stockport and I experienced food insecurity at a young age, and I have also seen the effect this has on others as they grow up. The cost-of-living crisis has made it increasingly hard for families to afford basic essentials such as food. No child or adult should have to choose between food or heating. No child should be hungry at school. As a recipient of free school meals, I believe that everyone in education should have at least one good, nutritious meal. For those from families on a low income this may be the only good meal they have in a day. Nutritious food is vital for learning and children and young people's physical and mental wellbeing. Knowing how I have benefitted from free school meals, I want the Government to ensure that every child and young person has a right to good food."

KEIRA, 16-YEAR-OLD FOOD AMBASSADOR, 2025

Prevalence of children in Year 6 living with overweight and obesity by deprivation group



DECILE 1 = MOST DEPRIVED
DECILE 10 = LEAST DEPRIVED

Source: National Child Measurement Programme, England, 2023/24 School Year

The Food Foundation
Children's Right2Food Dashboard

“School meals were originally brought in to help support children to learn, in the belief of creating a healthy and productive nation. Sadly, we’re in a situation where many children are going hungry, we’re facing a tough economic future and record numbers of people are out of work because of ill health. Now is the time to ensure we invest in the future of the country by ensuring that our children don’t go hungry, and schools can provide meals free of charge so that every child can have the freedom to flourish.”

WILLIAM ROBERTS, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, ROYAL SOCIETY FOR PUBLIC HEALTH, 2023³⁰

... and happier

Food insecurity affects children’s mental health and wellbeing, with children from families that are food insecure being more likely to suffer with mental health problems, including hyperactivity and inattention, suicidal thoughts, and mood and anxiety disorders.³¹ Simply being worried about where food will come from is sufficient to reduce children’s wellbeing when compared with children from food-secure households.³² Eating a school meal has been shown to be the best lunch option associated with **good mental wellbeing**.³³ And parents see the improvement in their child’s mental health as a result.³⁴

This is also particularly important for the estimated 2.6 million children currently living in households experiencing food insecurity, for whom a nutritious FSM is so important.³⁵

In surveys conducted in 2020 and 2021, over half of children from food insecure households who were receiving FSM reported feeling stressed and

worried on a daily basis.³⁶ Similarly, a 2022 survey of teachers found that over half of teachers felt that children coming to school hungry display anxiety.³⁷

In addition, children eligible for FSM often report feelings of stigma or shame.³⁸ And it is not just the hungry children themselves who are affected: a survey conducted by Childwise for The Food Foundation suggests that nearly half of all children say that they feel upset that some children do not have enough to eat at school.³⁹

“My friend wasn’t eligible for Free School Meals in primary, but he became eligible in secondary and he told me he used to worry about eating when he was in primary school. With Free School Meals, people can go into school not worrying about food or learning”

18-YEAR-OLD, QUOTED IN BITE BACK, MORE THAN A MEAL: THE REAL IMPACT OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS, 2022

... do better in school

“Free School Meals allowed me to eat the healthy foods which my family couldn’t afford and kept me hydrated throughout the school day. I could maintain my concentration in lessons, so secured top grades at GCSE. After winning a scholarship to an independent Sixth Form, I completed three degrees”

LOUISE POWELL, DIRECTOR, FILMMAKER AND BBC NEW CREATIVE FROM MIDDLESBROUGH, 2022

Being hungry affects behaviour. **When asked about children coming to school hungry, 88% of teachers reported pupils being excessively tired, 84% reported them being easily distracted, and 74% observed disruptive behaviour.**⁴⁰

A recent survey found 4 in 10 teachers said pupils in their class were regularly too hungry to learn, with the figure jumping to 63% in the most deprived areas.⁴¹ A 2018 review of Universal Infant FSM by the Education Policy Institute reported that teachers felt pupils’ readiness for learning improved as a result. Teachers also reported improved behaviour and concentration in the classroom and parents felt that their children’s dining etiquette and mealtime behaviour improved.⁴² This link between school food and behaviour has also been seen in the UK, with a recent evaluation reporting children feel stronger, healthier, and like they have more energy for the school day.⁴³

FSM can also help to foster a sense of community in schools. Henry Dimbleby and John Vincent noted in the 2013 School Food Plan: ‘When children sit down to eat with friends and teachers in a civilised environment, it cements relationships, helps them to develop social skills and reinforces positive behaviour throughout the day’.⁴⁴

Findings from the Department for Education Universal primary FSM pilot noted **improved**

‘During exams, I was eating a lot of unhealthy food and drinking energy drinks because it was cheaper and easier than getting a full meal [at school]. I think this affected my performance’

16-YEAR-OLD, QUOTED IN BITE BACK, MORE THAN A MEAL: THE REAL IMPACT OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS, 2022

academic attainment, with children on Universal Free School Meals making between four and eight weeks’ more progress in maths and English than similar pupils in comparison areas.⁴⁵ Importantly, attainment was most improved for pupils in less affluent families. Similar results have been found in other studies in the UK,⁴⁶ and in places such as Sweden⁴⁷ and the United States.⁴⁸ For instance, a recent study in the US found that expanding access to FSM, specifically to lower income households, led to higher graduation rates.⁴⁹ Many different effects of school meals may be responsible for this increase in attainment, including better health and pupils being better equipped to absorb material presented in school after eating a nutritious lunch.⁵⁰

... earn more over their lifetime

In 2022, Professor of Economics at Lund University Petter Lundborg, published a long-term study of Sweden’s Free School Meal programme.⁵¹ This **detailed economic analysis has shown not only an increase in attainment, but a 3% increase in lifetime income for those exposed to FSM during their entire time at primary school.**

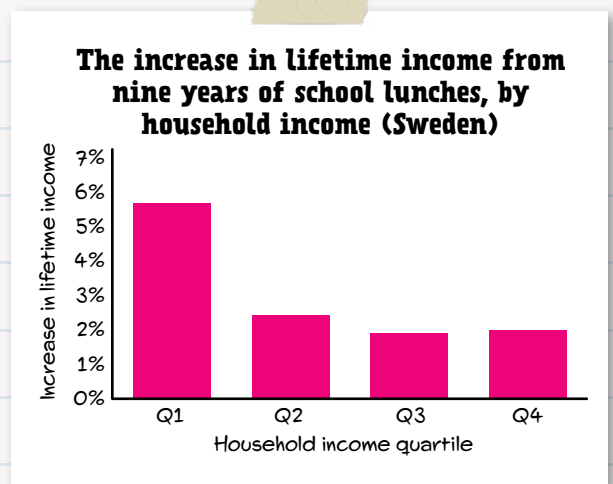
Importantly, the study explains that the economic benefit is more pronounced for children from the poorest households, suggesting that FSM reduced socioeconomic inequalities in adulthood.

For children from families in the bottom quartile by household income, receiving FSM for nine years increased lifetime income by almost 6% – a benefit-to-cost ratio of 7:1 (see also the next double-page spread for a cost-benefit analysis of extending FSM provision in England).

School meal debt:

Under a means-tested school meal system some families find it difficult to cover the cost of lunches, accruing dinner money debt. Research has

shown that dinner money debt in Primary schools increased by 50% over the last two academic years. In a survey, 82% of school staff said working with families to resolve dinner money debt is taking up staff time and capacity. Addressing dinner money debt also creates tension between parents and schools putting relationships under strain. Nearly 1 in 10 schools surveyed reported that part of their debt resolution process involves offering pupils different lunchtime options if there is an outstanding balance on their account, meaning that dinner money debt directly impacts children's experiences in the dining hall.⁵²



... and money stays in families' pockets

Families are under intense financial pressure: while food inflation has slowed since it hit a 45 year high of 19.1% in April 2023,⁵³ the cost of food remains high and prices are projected to increase by 4.2% on average in the second half of 2025.⁵⁴ Parents can save hundreds of pounds a year by

not having to pay for school meals or for packed lunches. A family previously purchasing a school meal saves £490 per child (based on £2.58 per child per day for 190 school days per year) (see pp16-17 'The Evidence from Universal Free School Meals in London').

What the government says

In 2013, the Department for Education (DfE) published a set of infographics extolling the virtues of Free School Meals. All these reasons are still valid today, and the research presented in this Evidence Pack continues to back up these important benefits. We have annotated this 2013 infographic from the DfE to reflect 2024 data.⁵⁶

FREE school meals health benefits

22.1% (circled)

Almost ~~20%~~ of children are obese by the time they leave primary school

A school meal helps address this by contributing to a **balanced diet** and encouraging children to try healthy options

HM Government #FreeSchoolMeals

FREE school meals health benefits

26% (circled)

Pilot studies showed a ~~20%~~ **increase** in the number of children eating vegetables at lunchtime in the free school meals pilot

The number consuming crisps and soft drinks **reduced by 18%**

HM Government #FreeSchoolMeals

FREE school meals learning benefits

2 months

Students who received free school meals in pilot studies were found to be 2 months ahead in maths and English

HM Government #FreeSchoolMeals

FREE school meals savings for families

~~£490~~ (crossed out)

£490 (circled)

A family could save £490 per year by not having to purchase a school lunch (based on £2.58 per day for 190 school days per year)

HM Government #FreeSchoolMeals

In contrast, only 1.6% of packed lunches meet School Food Standards!

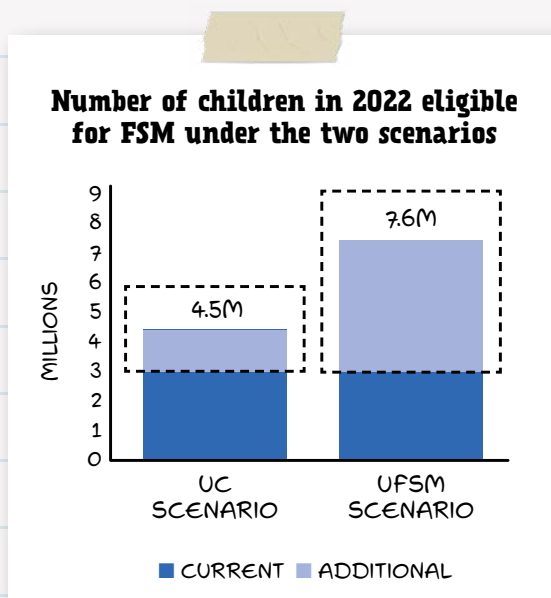
Cost-benefit analysis of Free School Meals

Analysis carried out by PwC shows that Free School Meals (FSM) not only have direct benefits on health, educational and employment, but also benefits to the wider economy. It projects that the wider contribution of universal FSM in primary and secondary schools in London would be £2.1bn and the overall contribution to England would be £13.9bn between 2024-2030.⁵⁷

Analysis published in 2022 shows significant return on investment for extending FSM first to all children from families in England who are on Universal Credit and secondly to every school child in state-funded education in England.

Two scenarios...

The research – *Investing in Children's Future: A Cost Benefit Analysis of Free School Meal Provision Expansion*⁵⁸ – was commissioned by Impact on Urban Health and undertaken by PwC, and is the most ambitious analysis to date of the societal and economic benefits of expanding FSM provision in England. It explores two scenarios for expansion over the period 2025 to 2045, giving enough time for increases in productivity and lifetime earnings to start to materialise after children leave school.



1 FSM is expanded to all children in England in households on Universal Credit:
The Universal Credit (UC) scenario.

2 FSM is expanded to all children in England, regardless of family income:
The Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) scenario.

Although the projected costs and benefits are modelled from 2025 to allow for on-the-ground changes and policy change, the expansion could and should be put in place immediately.

“Extending free school meals is one way that we can restore the support network around our young people by ensuring that they have at least one hot, cooked meal a day, giving them the energy to learn in the afternoon. No child should go hungry at school. The Liberal Democrats would extend free school meals, beginning with every child in poverty, to save parents money, encourage healthy eating and give children the energy to learn. It is a no-brainer.”

MUNIRA WILSON, LIBERAL DEMOCRAT MP, IN HOUSE OF COMMONS WESTMINSTER HALL DEBATE, 7 MAY 2024⁵⁹

...with impressive returns

UC scenario

Under the UC scenario, the core benefits over 20 years add up to **£8.9 billion**, compared to a total cost of £6.4 billion (including the capital expenditure needed to extend provision of FSM to more children). This is a return of **£1.38 for every £1** invested.

The cost in the first year of provision would be **£477 million***.

- » Increased saving on food costs for families: **£5.9 billion**
- » Increased lifetime earnings and contributions: **£2.9 billion**
- » Other smaller cost savings to schools and to the NHS (obesity costs)

When the wider economic benefits are included, the economic returns increase further: an additional **£16.2 billion** will be generated in the economy under the UC scenario.

UFSM scenario

Under the UFSM scenario, the core benefits over 20 years are **£41.3 billion**, compared to a total cost of £24.1 billion (including capital expenditure). This is an even higher return: **£1.71 for every £1** invested.

The cost in the first year of provision would be **£1.8 billion**.

- » Increased saving on food costs for families: **£22.5 billion**
- » Increased lifetime earnings and contributions: **£18.5 billion**
- » Other smaller cost savings to schools and to the NHS (obesity costs)

Taking the wider economic benefits into account, an additional **£58.2 billion** will be generated in the economy under the UFSM scenario.

And the true return to society of this investment in our children may be even greater than this modelling suggests, with further benefits both for the NHS from reduced obesity and diet-related diseases in adulthood and for the wider food production sector, such as from local growing and supply of ingredients for meals.

What benefits were assessed?

Previous studies have focused on specific impacts of FSM, such as child nutrition, but this report fills an important gap in the evidence by taking a more extensive and comprehensive approach to the costs and benefits.

Core benefits arise directly from the children who receive FSM, through improvements across two pathways:

- » **Education and employment:**
 - » Improved educational attainment in the medium term, leading to improved productivity and employment longer term, contributing to improved lifetime earnings and contributions.
 - » Improved ability to learn and reduced absenteeism in the short term – with linked cost savings for schools (such as catch-up programmes).
- » **Health and nutrition:**
 - » Reduced financial pressure for families on lower incomes, enabling the purchase of more nutritious food at home.
 - » Decreased incidence of obesity and diet-related diseases in childhood – the savings calculated are for the lower health costs of a reduction in obesity among children receiving FSM over the 2025–2045 period only.

Wider benefits are indirect, generated over and above the core benefits, impacting the broader economy and supply chain. These include **increased demand for school food catering, expanding employment opportunities and increasing spending in the school food economy**. They are not included in the core cost-benefit analysis as they involve multiplier effects, but the total wider benefits are presented above.

*Current analysis by Child Poverty Action Group estimates the cost for the first year of expansion to all families on Universal Credit to be £600 million, based on updated per meal costs⁶⁰



The **EVIDENCE** from **Free School Meals in London**



In 2023, the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, announced Free School Meals would be available to all primary age children, expanding access to 270,000 additional children across London. Drawing on an independent evaluation commissioned by Impact on Urban Health,⁶¹ this section presents the research findings on the impact of this policy, as well as research carried out by Angus Holford and Birgitta Rabe, Institute for Social and Economic Research, the University of Essex, on universal Free School Meal schemes introduced in London prior to 2023.⁶²

Early findings on the impact of Universal Primary Free School Meals in London

Free School Meals support children and family health and wellbeing. Findings from the evaluation of Universal Primary Free School Meals in London showed children were less worried about food at school and more willing to try new foods.⁶³ Children reported feelings of greater fairness, belonging, and community and 31% of families said their child's mental wellbeing had improved.⁶⁴

The evaluation of the Universal Primary Free School Meals introduced in London in 2023 have found that 84% of parents across the income spectrum

reported the availability of Universal Primary Free School Meals helped or significantly helped household finances. Parents in receipt of Universal Credit were more likely to say the policy was significantly helping household finances.⁶³

Parents reported that money saved was helping cover other household essentials or other school-related items such as uniforms, trips, or sports clubs. A third of parents said that the policy means they have less debt.⁶⁵

Universal free school meals help family finances

This reflects findings from research on the impact of Universal Free School Meals carried out by the University of Essex, which found that families previously purchasing a school meal save £33.50 per child in a four-week timeframe (based on £2.30 per child per day for the school year).⁶⁶

These results show that UFSM policies have significant benefits for children and their families. The policy also has wider benefits beyond school food, with positive outcomes seen in homes and communities.



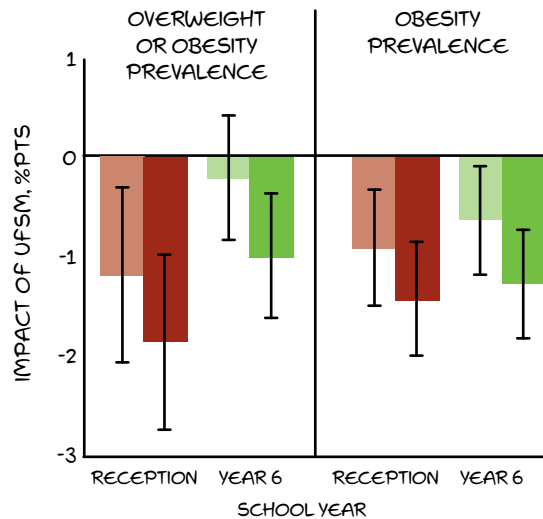
Evidence from four London Boroughs: Newham, Islington, Southwark and Tower Hamlets

A study of the the impact of Universal Free School Meal Programmes run by four boroughs in London on body weight outcomes are that:⁶⁷

- » Receiving UFSM reduces prevalence of obesity by between 7-11% among Reception children and between 2-5% among Year 6 children on average.
- » This corresponds to a 1-1.5 and 0.6-1.2 percentage point reduction in obesity (see Figure 1). These impacts are substantial, given how hard it is to influence obesity through other interventions involving exercise or healthy eating education.

Figure 1: Impacts of UFSM on children's bodyweight outcomes

Light bars use rest of London as control group, dark bars use rest of England as control group.

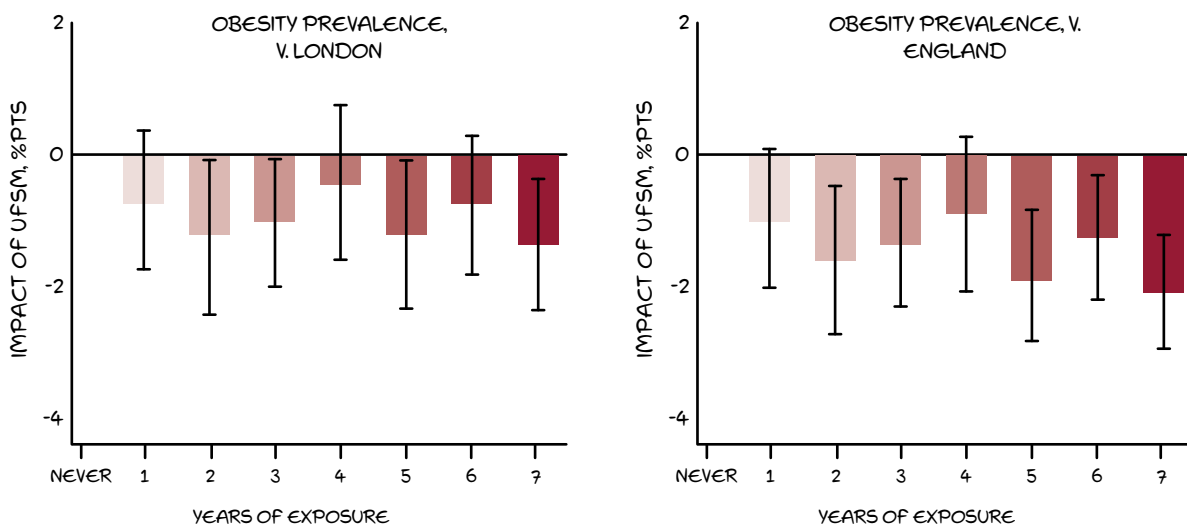


SOURCE: Holford, A., and Rabe, B., 2024 'The Impacts of Universal Free School Meals schemes in England' ISER. Data from the National Child Measurement Programme.

- » Effects are largest among Year 6 children who received UFSM the longest: the reduction in obesity was between 5-8% among children who received them throughout primary school, a 1.2-2.1 percentage points reduction (see Figure 2).

- » The impact of UFSM did not extend to schools with pre-existing high prevalence of obesity, suggesting more support may be needed in different environments.*

Figure 2: Impact of UFSM on Year 6 children's BMI classifications, by duration of exposure



SOURCE: Holford, A., and Rabe, B., 2024 'The Impacts of Universal Free School Meals schemes in England' ISER, data from: National Child Measurement Programme. Pooled two-way school and academic-year fixed-effect regression with separate treatment indicators for each duration of exposure. N = 19,908 school-years (v. London), 132,002 school-years (v. England). Capped lines indicate 95% confidence intervals.

*For full results and methodology, see Holford A. and Rabe B., 2024, Universal free school meals and children's bodyweight. Impacts by age and duration of exposure, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhealeco.2024.102937>



Support for Free School Meals

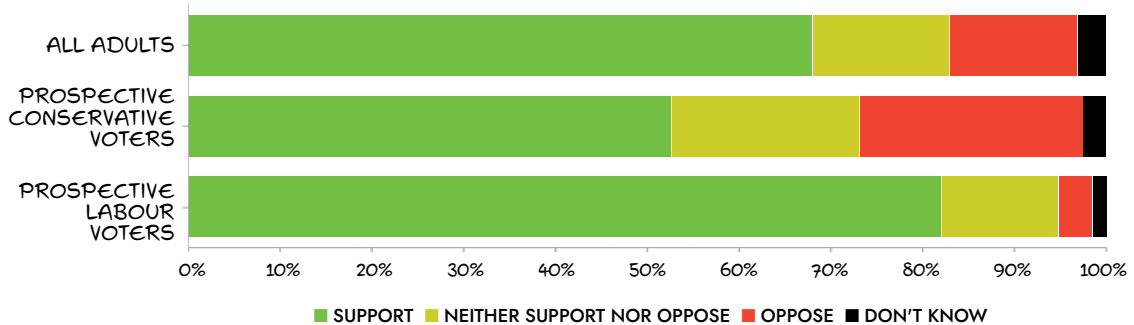
Support for Free School Meals comes from MPs across the political spectrum, from the public, from teachers, from those who provide the meals, and from children themselves.

Cross-party support

From the first Education Provision of Meals Act in 1906 to Wales' and Scotland's commitments to expand Universal Free School Meals in more primary school years in 2021, every political party has played a role in ensuring school children have access to good nutrition as a core pillar of their education.

In a 2023 poll, 82% of prospective Labour voters and 53% of prospective Conservative voters supported the expansion of Free School Meals

Support levels for immediately extending Free School Meals to all children whose families receive Universal Credit, and in the long term providing them for all school children.



SOURCE: Poll commissioned by the School Food Review and conducted by Public First. 3,011 members of the public across England were surveyed from 27th June - 4th July 2023. The results are weighted by interlocking age & gender, region and social grade to Nationally Representative Proportion.

“The proposition [to extend FSM to all children from families in receipt of UC] is urgent, right and timely”

MICHAEL GOVE, FORMER SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION, 2022⁶⁸



“I know from personal experience what a difference these meals can make and it’s been fantastic to hear from teachers how much better children are performing and also how much parents and their children have benefited, with parents not having to worry about how to provide their children with a healthy, nutritious meal during the school day.”

SADIQ KHAN, MAYOR OF LONDON, 2024⁶⁹

“Universal free school meals are vital; they ensure every child can focus on learning without the distraction of hunger or the stigma that can come alongside means-tested provision. Expanding eligibility is a compassionate investment in our future which will not only reduce inequality and improve children’s wellbeing, but also boost educational attainment and benefit our society in the long term.”

ELLIE CHOWNS, GREEN PARTY MP, 2025

Beyond politics – a united vision for healthy school food



- » Introduced the 1944 Education Act which provided free school meals to all children for four years, before introducing means testing.
- » Introduced free school milk for all primary school children in 1946.⁷⁰
- » Expanded Free School Meal eligibility to sixth formers and further education colleges following the Conservative's 1996 Education Act⁷¹.
- » Introduced nutritional school food regulations in 2001.⁷²
- » Delivered Universal Free School Meals in primary schools in Wales as part of a cooperation agreement with Plaid Cymru.⁷³
- » Are introducing universal primary school breakfast clubs in England starting in 2025.⁷⁴
- » Extended funding for the Holiday Activities and Food Programme for another year 2025-6.⁷⁵

- » Secured Universal Infant Free School Meals in England in 2014 as a flagship policy under the Coalition Government.⁸¹
- » Pledged to expand Free School Meals to all children in poverty and expand Universal Primary Free School Meals when public finances allow in 2024 manifesto.⁸²



**Plaid Cymru
Party of Wales**

- » Signed a cooperation agreement with Welsh Government in 2021 securing the introduction of Universal Primary Free School Meals during current parliament.⁸³
- » Committed to campaign for universal school meals to be expanded to secondary school learners in Years 7 to 11 so that all children attending school receive a nutritious meal every day.⁸⁴



- » Introduced Universal Infant Free School Meals in 2014, while in Coalition Government with the Liberal Democrats.⁷⁶
- » The Scottish Conservatives 2020 'Restore our schools' commitment to Universal Primary Free School Meals⁷⁷ helped build cross-party support for Scottish Government to introduce the policy starting in 2021.
- » Introduced revised mandatory School Food Standards from 2015, following recommendations from a commissioned School Food Plan.⁷⁸
- » Launched the National School Breakfast Programme in 2018, using revenues from the Soft Drinks Industry Levy.⁷⁹
- » Launched the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme as a pilot in 2018 and expanded it to the whole of England in 2021.⁸⁰

SNP

- » Have expanded Free School Meals to all primary school children up to P5 nationally and to children in P6-P7 who are in families in receipt of Scottish Child Payment.⁸⁵
- » Piloting expanded access to Free School Meals in secondary schools S1-S3 in eight local authorities from August 2025 for children in families receiving Scottish Child Payment, as part of an agreement with Scottish Greens.⁸⁶
- » Committed to a 'good food nation', ensuring school meals are healthy, nutritious and well sourced.⁸⁷



- » First Education Provision of Meals Act in 1906, to ensure food was provided for the poorest children in school, was introduced under a Liberal Government.⁹⁹



Green Party

- » Committed to all children having a daily free school meal, made from nutritious ingredients and based on local and organic or sustainable produce, and free breakfast clubs for children up to Year 6 in their 2024 manifesto.⁸⁸

Public support

Poll after poll shows strong public support for Free School Meals. A survey held in late summer 2022 found: 87% of the public think that the Government has a lot or some responsibility for helping children – up from 84% at the same time in 2021.⁸⁹ Public First research with over 3,000 adults in 2023 on behalf of the School Food Review found that 71% of adults believe the current eligibility threshold was either too low or should not exist at all.⁹⁰

“School lunches were a massive issue, financially and physically. Knowing my child will get some form of meal is a relief to me and takes away the stress.”

PARENT, QUOTED IN IMPACT ON URBAN HEALTH 2024, MORE THAN A MEAL: AN INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OF UNIVERSAL PRIMARY FREE SCHOOL MEALS FOR CHILDREN IN LONDON⁹¹

Parents

A 2024 survey of 2039 UK parents by Savanta for Sustain’s Children’s Food Campaign reveals overwhelming support for expanding school meals to all children:⁹²

- » **9 in 10** parents (89%) want to see immediate expansion of free school meals to every child living in poverty.
- » More than **7 in 10** parents (75%) would like all children of all ages to have access to a free school meal, regardless of their background.
- » Nearly **8 in 10** (77%) would like to see a progressive, phased expansion of school meals to all children.
- » **8 in 10** (81%) parents support automatic registration for Free School Meals for all entitled pupils, instead of the current application system

Similarly, a poll conducted by Deltapoll for the National Education Union in May 2024 revealed overwhelming backing for Universal Primary Free School Meals among parents in England:⁹³

- » **77%** support extending free school meals to all primary school children, regardless of household income.
- » **84%** view free school meals as necessary to ensure no child goes hungry
- » **80%** believe free school meals can help improve children’s health

A 2022 survey on school meal provision, drawing on data from over 300,000 users of a cashless payments platform,⁹⁴ found that 68% of parents and carers would choose to spend any increased funding for schools on measures relating to food such as subsidising meals, extending eligibility or improving quality.

Teacher Support

Teachers see every day that the ongoing cost-of-living crisis is leading to children unable to buy lunch, and undermining attempts to level up education for the most vulnerable children. School leaders and education bodies, representing a million teachers and education specialists in England, have appealed multiple times to successive governments to expand healthy school meals to more children.⁹⁵ A survey commissioned by Chefs in Schools provided concerning evidence on the high levels of food insecurity among children at school:⁹⁶

- » **83%** of teachers reported seeing children arriving at school hungry because their families cannot afford enough food.
- » **79%** reported seeing children with insufficient food in packed lunches
- » **85%** said they knew of currently ineligible children who would benefit from FSM.

Polling commissioned by School Food Matters in February 2025 revealed that one in five teachers (20%) reported that the number of children too hungry to learn has increased since the beginning of the 2024/25 academic year. One in four (25%) teachers said they personally purchased food for hungry children this academic year, or know a colleague who has.⁹⁷

In polling commissioned by School Food Matters in 2024, four in 10 teachers (38%) reported their school had been providing free school lunches to pupils who were not eligible, rising to 51% in the poorest areas. Overall, the 2024 polling revealed significant teacher support for expanding healthy school meals:⁹⁸

- » **97%** of teachers saw benefits to pupils having a nutritious school meal, while only 1% did not.
- » **71%** of teachers considered universal Free School Meals a worthwhile investment in children's education.
- » **70%** saw attentiveness in class as a benefit of Free School Meals.

“The Muslim Council of Britain has long advocated for greater intervention from government to tackle the rising levels of poverty and inequality in the UK. It is unconscionable that 2.6 million children have experienced food insecurity, making child hunger an epidemic in our schools. The Muslim Council of Britain has joined a broad coalition of civil society groups to call for an extension of free school meals to all primary school children. No child should have to endure hunger.”

SPOKESPERSON FOR THE MUSLIM COUNCIL OF BRITAIN, 2022¹⁰⁰

Health professionals support

UK public health leaders have called for expansion of healthy school meals as one way to achieve a healthier generation of children. In 2024, leading public health and medical groups, from paediatricians to school nurses, jointly launched their Good Food For Children report in Parliament, calling for universal primary and secondary free school lunches.¹⁰¹ They also called for better monitoring to ensure healthy school food standards were being delivered.

“School nurses are witnessing and being asked to support a worrying number of families who cannot feed their children adequately due to the cost-of-living crisis; children are turning up to school cold, tired, hungry, worried, sad and, as a result, unable to learn. Free School Meal provision would go a long way to addressing this rising public health emergency; this a basic right and urgent need.”

SHARON WHITE OBE, FORMER CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF THE SCHOOL AND PUBLIC HEALTH NURSES ASSOCIATION, 2023¹⁰²

Caterer support

School kitchen teams are a core part of delivering healthy school meals — and a recent survey by Chefs in Schools found that 68% of teachers regard the school kitchen team as being part of the school community.¹⁰³ Caterers support the extension of Free School Meals and are confident that extension to all children from families that receive Universal Credit can be rolled out immediately, as an October 2022 statement from LACA indicates:¹⁰⁴

“Whilst each school will, potentially, have its own issues to address, LACA considers that the infrastructure needed to facilitate the roll-out of an extension of FSM to those families on Universal Credit would be manageable because the numbers of pupils per school could be accommodated without having to massively overhaul dining rooms or the length of the lunch breaks”

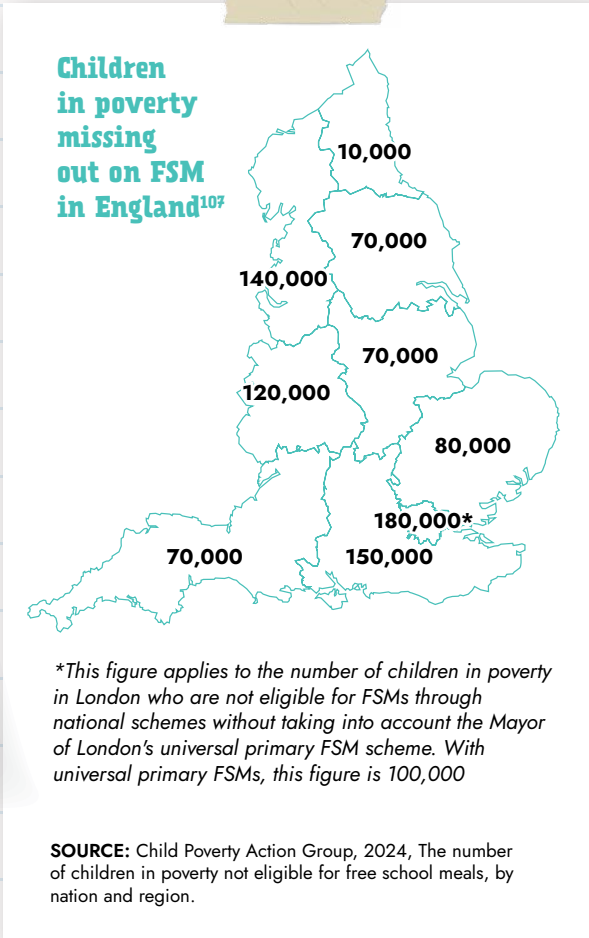
“Free School Meals provided me with hot, nutritious meals which kept me full so I could have the energy to focus on my studies and work hard to get to where I am today. It also let me feel included, as I could socialise and eat the same meals alongside my friends — and brought comfort to a stressful time for me and my family. It's something I'm passionate about and led me to create a campaign advocating for 24/7 access to food for NHS staff”

NEELY MOZAWALA, FOUNDER OF NO HUNGRY STAFF

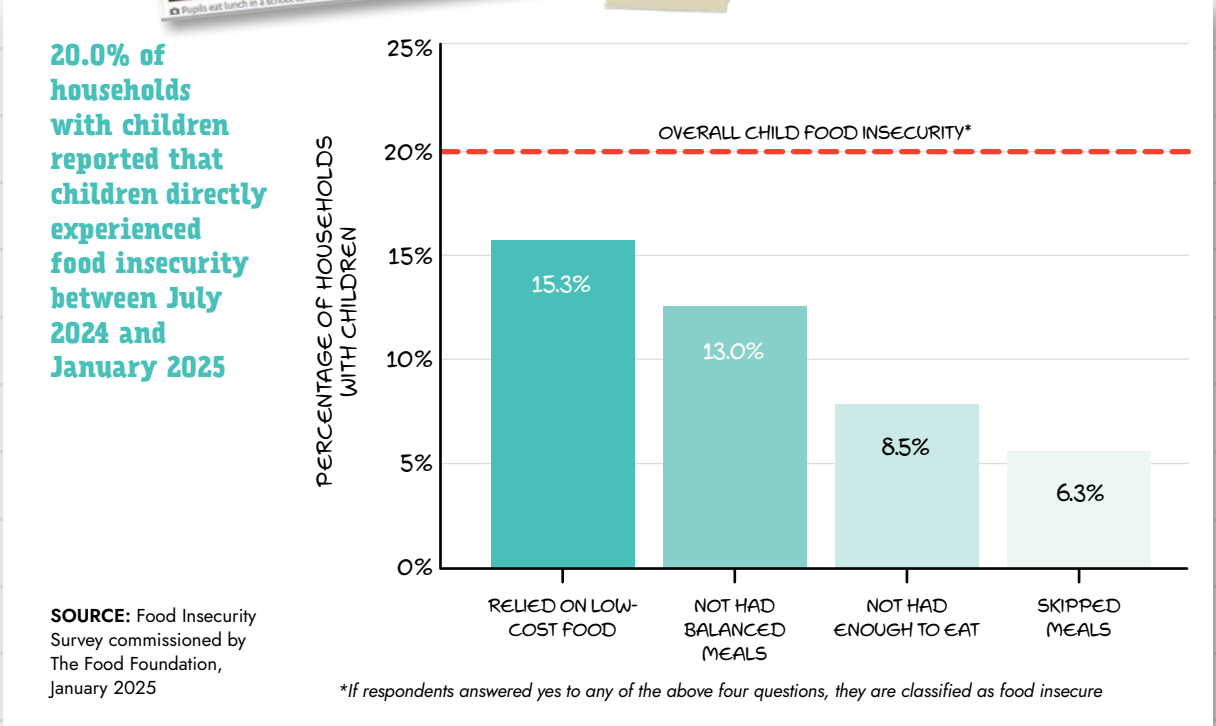
Children missing out

Free School Meals can be an important part of ensuring that children’s right to good food is upheld. All too often, however, children are missing out: an estimated 900,000 children in England who are living in poverty are not currently receiving FSM.¹⁰⁵ The Food Foundation Food Insecurity Survey found that in January 2025, almost 1 in 7 households with children not on Free School Meals had experienced food insecurity.¹⁰⁶

“There’s two chicken shops about one minute walk from my school that sell two wings and chips for £1. A school dinner is £2.40. If it was free, people would not eat unhealthily”
 15-YEAR-OLD, QUOTED IN BITE BACK, MORE THAN A MEAL: THE REAL IMPACT OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS, 2022



Households with children are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity.



Interviews undertaken by BiteBack 2030 give insights into the lived experience of children in school, illustrating very real concerns about missing out on healthy food – both at home (due to food insecurity) and at school.¹⁰⁸ Their comments are included throughout this Evidence Pack.

Children also care about each other. A study by Childwise for The Food Foundation found that nearly one in three children have shared food with friends at school because they didn't have enough to eat, and more than one in five know friends who are hungry and do not have enough to eat at school.¹¹⁰

Children care about food: they care about where it comes from and they care about what they eat. Work by Fix our Food asked children from 11 Yorkshire primary schools what they would do about food at school, were they the head teacher, with answer options including school trips to learn about food, school gardens and reducing waste – but the top priority was Free School Meals for all.¹⁰⁹



“My experience of food poverty is I grew up not having enough money to afford food. I went without food in primary school a lot of the time because I wasn't on Free School Meals”

ASHA, 18-YEAR-OLD YOUNG FOOD AMBASSADOR, FROM CUMBRIA, QUOTED IN 2022

What's for lunch?

When a Free School Meal is not an option, food diaries can give insights into what kind of food is accessible for young people who sometimes struggle to afford food at school. Three young people from Bite Back kept a food diary to record alternative lunch options including a packed lunch, food from a supermarket and a meal from a food outlet.

meals, they do indicate that the food options readily available to young people do not provide the same nutritional benefits as a school meal, which must meet School Food Standards.¹¹⁰ For example the meal options recorded did not include fruit and vegetables and tended to include food and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt.

While these diaries provide a limited snapshot of what young people eat as an alternative to school

The Appendix to this Evidence Pack (pp. 32–33) sets out food diaries written by Bite Back youth board members.

In brief:

Snapshot of School Food Standards

School Food Standards

Must be one portion of fruit and one of veg every day – and at least three different fruit and veg every week

.....

One or more portion of starchy food and non-dairy protein every day

.....

No confectionery, chocolate or chocolate-coated products and no more than two portions of food containing pastry or deep-fried each week – and only healthier drinks



The case for auto-enrolment onto Free School Meals

Even among households that meet the strict £7,400 FSM entitlement threshold, it's estimated that 250,000 children aren't registered¹¹¹ and, therefore, are unable to receive the hot meal they are entitled to. Under-registration of FSM is driven by multiple factors, including administrative complexity, language difficulties, lack of awareness of entitlement, and stigma around applying.¹¹²

Schools also suffer financially from under registration since they miss out on linked Pupil Premium, equating to £1,480 per primary school child and £1,050 per secondary school child. These funds enable schools to better support disadvantaged pupils and close the attainment gap between them and their peers.

Recognising these challenges, some local authorities in England have introduced an 'opt-out' or auto-enrolment system, whereby local authorities automatically register entitled children based on welfare data, unless their families choose to opt out.

What impact is auto-enrolment already having?

The FixOurFood schools research team (University of York), in partnership with Bremner & Co and The Food Foundation, have been working collaboratively with local authorities on action research designed to help set up, evaluate and promote auto-enrolment processes. Preliminary data from participating local authorities indicate an average of 1000 extra children have been registered per local authority area, bringing in over £1 million in Pupil Premium per area. Importantly, the newly identified children predominantly come from single-parent households, non-White communities and families where English is not the first language, addressing significant inequities in access.¹¹³

"The process of setting up auto-enrolment [...] was beset by legal issues around data sharing. We were sent around in circles. [...] It shouldn't be the case that a local authority is having to go through this process against government departments – it costs money and takes significant time and resources."

LOCAL AUTHORITY REPRESENTATIVE, 2024¹¹⁴

"Setting up an auto enrolment project has been a resource-intensive process. Given that not all children live in the same local authority they go to school in, it makes so much more sense for the national government to step in at the national level and auto-enrol children who should be getting a free school meal."

LOCAL AUTHORITY REPRESENTATIVE, 2024¹¹⁵

The need for a national approach

Whilst many local authorities are showing commendable commitment to setting up local authority run auto-enrolment processes, they have encountered significant bureaucratic and legal hurdles. These include conflicting legal advice on data-sharing, delays caused by government departments and difficulties coordinating agreements with schools. These challenges place additional strain on already overburdened councils.¹¹⁶

“It feels very much like we are trying to do something underhand when all we are trying to do is support children access a benefit to which they are legitimately entitled, there really shouldn't be this many obstacles should there?”

LOCAL AUTHORITY REPRESENTATIVE, 2023¹¹⁷

“Growing up, I was always embarrassed about receiving Free School Meals. Schools with poor admin make it difficult to get Free School Meals and make it an embarrassing experience. The situation in my school was that you basically had to beg for Free School Meals, send a tonne of emails. Admin is a really big part of Free School Meals”

17-YEAR-OLD, QUOTED IN BITE BACK, MORE THAN A MEAL: THE REAL IMPACT OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS, 2022

For this reason, the School Food Review are advocating for national auto-enrolment. This approach has a precedent; auto-enrolment in workplace pensions significantly increased participation from 55% in 2012 to 88% by 2021, demonstrating its efficacy in overcoming enrolment barriers.¹¹⁸ Auto-enrolment has widespread and ongoing support from MPs, educational organisations and local government¹¹⁹ and 8 in 10 parents are in favour of automatic registration.¹²⁰



“Breakfast clubs ensure that no child has to start the school day hungry, which will be transformative. However, school lunches also really matter, as the most effective way to ensure access to a nutritious hot meal for the most disadvantaged children...As a minimum, we should ensure that all children who are currently eligible receive a free school lunch.”

HELEN HAYES MP, IN A DEBATE ON THE CHILDREN'S WELLBEING AND SCHOOLS BILL, JANUARY 2025¹²¹

Where are Universal Free School Meals already a reality?

Several countries already dish up free school meals to all students. One hundred and eight countries have now joined the global School Meals Coalition to accelerate access to school meals for all children by 2030.¹²² The longest running programme in Finland has been serving up universal school meals since 1948,¹²³ whilst India now feeds 125 million children a day. Brazil has fed school children from low income backgrounds since the 1940s but expanded free school meals to all children in 2009. Estonia, Sweden¹²⁴ and a growing number of US states also offer universal school meals.

Here in the UK, it's a postcode lottery. Whilst change to expanding Free School Meal (FSM) entitlement at a national level in England has been incremental, other areas across the UK have been making greater progress. As well as primary school meals in London (see p16-17), here are three more case studies of what's happening:

Scotland

In Scotland, Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) have been rolled out to all pupils in Primary 1 to Primary 5, ensuring that younger children receive free meals regardless of household income. This expansion builds on the previous provision, which initially covered only P1 to P3.

During the 2024-25 academic year, access is being extended to Primary 6 and 7 pupils whose families receive the Scottish Child Payment (SCP). Families eligible for this support need to apply with evidence of SCP receipt to access the meals.¹²⁵

Looking ahead, as part of a budget agreement with the Scottish Greens, the Scottish Government will pilot an extension of free school meals to S1-S3 pupils in eight local authority areas. Beginning in August 2025, the pilot also focuses on pupils whose families receive the SCP and will include a mix of urban, rural, and island communities.¹²⁶ These efforts aim to tackle food insecurity and reduce stigma associated with means-tested meals while ensuring more children have access to nutritious food during the school day.

Wales

The Universal Primary Free School Meals (UPFSM) programme was introduced in September 2022 as part of the Co-operation Agreement between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru, aiming to tackle child poverty and support families amid rising living costs.¹²⁷ The rollout was carried out in stages, ensuring a gradual expansion of the scheme to reach all eligible children.

As of September 2024, the Welsh Government and local authorities across Wales have successfully completed the rollout across all maintained primary schools in Wales. This means that every child from Reception to Year 6 is now entitled to a free school meal each weekday during term time, regardless of household income, making Wales the first UK nation to offer free school meals to all primary pupils.

The Welsh Government's Backing Local Firms Fund has also supported a pilot programme by Food Sense Wales to connect farmers, local authorities, caterers and schools with the aim of getting more organically grown Welsh veg in schools.¹²⁸

"A healthy school meal is vital in ensuring that no child feels hungry during the school day, helping their concentration and wellbeing and enabling them to achieve their full potential. Free school meals are also providing welcome support to families and helping tackle child poverty. This is a momentous occasion for children here in Wales. I'm incredibly proud that Wales has become the first UK nation to offer free school meals to all primary pupils."

ELUNED MORGAN, FIRST MINISTER, WALES GOVERNMENT, 2024¹²⁶

Tower Hamlets

In September 2023, Tower Hamlets became the first local authority in the UK to offer Universal Free School Meals to all secondary school pupils up to the age of 16.¹³⁰ The initiative aimed to ensure every pupil received a free, nutritious meal while encouraging healthy eating habits and supporting families through the cost-of-living crisis. One of the key challenges was ensuring that school kitchens could meet the increased demand within a short timescale. To address this, the council invested an additional £722,000 in new kitchen equipment, enabling schools to expand meal production.¹³¹

Since its launch, the scheme has had a significant impact. Secondary schools are successfully providing freshly cooked meals to 8,500 pupils daily, and over one million additional meals have been served to those who would have otherwise had to pay.¹³² In 2023, take-up of school meals amongst pupils eligible for Free School Meals was just 55%, with many not using their entitlement. However the universal meal programme has now achieved take up of 82%, including an increase in pupils who were already eligible for free meals.¹³³ With nearly half of children in the borough living below the poverty line—the highest rate in the UK¹³⁴—the scheme has provided crucial support to struggling families.

The programme has been widely praised by both pupils and teachers. Students no longer have to share a meal due to lack of money, and teachers have reported a marked improvement in behaviour, as well as a reduction in hunger-related anger and distress. Given that almost half of Tower Hamlets pupils enter secondary school with excess weight, the initiative is also seen as a vital step towards improving young people's physical health and promoting a healthier future for the borough.

"We are delighted to be part of the universal free school meals offer. Our parents and carers have been grateful for the additional support it gives them in these challenging times. Additionally, we have seen the educational benefits of the programme with improved focus for young people, allowing our pupils to achieve highly at Swanlea School in Tower Hamlets, placing us in the top 5% of schools nationally."

KABIR MIAH, HEAD OF SCHOOL, SWANLEA SCHOOL, WHITECHAPEL.¹³⁵



School Food Matters. School meals - secondary students.

Four ~~key~~ messages

to make the case for Free School Meals

What comes to mind when you think about school food? Memories of your favourite school dinner? Concern about children going to school hungry? It's an emotive subject, but the evidence on Free School Meals is unequivocal. We've pulled out four talking points to help you make the case for Free School Meals - and challenge misconceptions.

1 Breakfast is a great start... but it's not the whole story

We all know breakfast is an important start to the day - but the superpower of school food doesn't stop there.

The introduction of free breakfast clubs in every primary school is hugely welcome, and has the potential to reduce the number of children starting the school day hungry.

However, we know that many children struggle to get to school on time, or skip breakfast, particularly pupils from lower socio-economic groups.¹³⁶ Secondary school pupils are also not currently entitled to this provision. A free school lunch, embedded within the school day, is likely to reach more pupils.

2 School meals can and should provide good nutrition

Millions of children regularly eat a high-quality, hot school lunch, provided for by hardworking school cooks and chefs. Although quality can still be improved in some cases, the majority of school meals served every day contain far more nutrition – including fresh fruit and vegetables – than an average packed lunch.¹³⁷

“Planning budgets and finding creative solutions to cover the expense of subsidising meals takes time - time I would usually put towards the curriculum, but I love these children and want to ensure they are well-nourished. A simple solution would be to provide enough funding to ensure that every child can access good food at school.”

LISA WILLIAMS, HEADTEACHER, RUSHEY GREEN PRIMARY SCHOOL, LONDON, 2022

A NOTE ABOUT SCHOOL FOOD STANDARDS

School Food Standards have been in place for cooked school lunches since 2006 and were revised in 2015: these restrict confectionery, savoury snacks and soft drinks and require that vegetables, protein and dairy are included in each meal. In contrast, a study of packed lunches in 2016 found that just 1.6% of packed lunches met the standards that are set for school food.¹³⁸

The following measures are key to sustaining and improving the quality of school meals:

- » Ensuring that there is enough money in the school food system to pay for good food and staff training. There is a virtuous circle to the economics of school food: the more meals a kitchen is producing, the more efficiently the meals can be made.
- » Introducing a school food accountability framework, which should include embedding quality assurance as a condition of grant for school food funding, allocating 2p per meal to fund School Food Improvement Officers in local councils, rolling out a national school food audit scheme follow the pilots by the Food Standards Agency¹³⁹, and requiring schools to appoint a Governor / Trustee with responsibility for food and to report against a school food policy.
- » Updating the school food standards after a comprehensive consultation and testing process to ensure that the revised standards are easy to implement and meet the required nutritional framework.¹⁴⁷

Extending FSM will keep money in parents' pockets, ensure that children are offered a healthy meal every school day, and put more funding for quality meals back into the school catering system.

3 Free School Meals are good value for money

Investing in children's nutrition is the foundation for success in health, education, and the economy—without it, we limit their potential. When we ensure our children are well-nourished, we are building a stronger, more resilient society. Neglecting this investment today will weaken our nation's future prosperity and economic stability. Read more about the billions of pounds of benefits of Free School Meals on pp.14-15.

The Government has set a rate of £2.58 per child per day for benefits-related FSM in its National Funding Formula for schools¹⁴⁰ — meaning that, for less than the cost of a meal deal in a café or supermarket, children can be served a hot, nutritious meal.

Universal Free School Meals could also have wider economic benefits, generating £13.9bn in economic activity between 2024-30 and an additional 40,000 new jobs in 2030 in England.¹⁴¹



4 It's the stigma – not the food – that puts many children off school meals

Children do want to eat school meals: a survey from Childwise¹⁴² shows that one in three children who don't currently get a Free School Meal say they would like to have one. In addition, many more parents would welcome their children having Free School Meals: over half of those whose children don't currently receive FSM would like them to.¹⁴³

However, for some children, receiving Free School Meals can be a stigmatising experience because it singles them out to their peers as being poor. This can reduce take-up and result in children not receiving the nutritious lunch to which they are entitled. Stigma can be reduced when schools use electronic cards and fingerprint-based systems.

Universal free school meals can help reduce stigma, as eligibility is no longer defined by income threshold. Evidence shows that uptake by those eligible for means-tested FSM increases when the offer is universal.¹⁴⁴

"On half days they come in with a paper bag, which has a sandwich and piece of fruit. I think it's the most mortifying experience I've ever had because they make it incredibly obvious that you can't afford your lunch. They bring it into class and you have to collect it"

15-YEAR-OLD, QUOTED IN BITE BACK, MORE THAN A MEAL: THE REAL IMPACT OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS, 2022

School Food Matters. School meals - secondary students.




Free school meals really are a superpower that impacts all areas of schooling, including social relationships. There are clear benefits to the school community from pupils sitting down together and eating the same food, as well as observing and learning social skills through the shared dining experience. This helps children learn the behaviour that enables them to be successful as an adult and a professional.



Our call to action

Expand entitlement to all children from families in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent benefits, as a first step to universal Free School Meals for all school children in England.

Introduce auto-enrolment for Free School Meals to ensure all those who are entitled are registered to receive them.



Appendix

Food diaries: What do young people eat when they can't access a Free School Meal?

Bite Back asked three young people – who self-identified as young people who are not eligible for Free School Meals, but sometimes struggle to afford food at school – to keep a food diary of the options available to them as an alternative to a school meal including a packed lunch brought from home, a meal bought from a supermarket and a meal bought from a food outlet. A registered public health nutritionist compared the nutrition provided by these meals with the School Food Standards,¹¹¹ which are intended to ensure that school meals provide young people with the energy and nutrition they need across the whole school day.

Note: Some assumptions have been made as the School Food Standards set criteria for nutrition across the school week and the diaries just provide a snapshot of food consumed on a single day. In addition, full nutrition and portion size information was not available for the food diary meals, so a comprehensive comparison to School Food Standards criteria could not be done.

Nutritionist's comments: None of the food diary meals contain a portion of whole fruit or vegetables, compared with the requirement for at least one portion of each every day in school meals and a variety across the week. The food diary meals also included several portions of starchy carbohydrates and protein foods cooked in fat or breadcrumb- or batter-coated – these are limited to twice per week in the School Food Standards. In addition to an overall absence of nutritious foods, many of the meals contained food and drinks that are excluded from the School Food Standards, such as chocolate confectionery, crisps and soft drinks.

While these diaries provide a limited snapshot of what young people eat as an alternative to school meals, they do indicate that the food options readily available to young people do not provide the same nutritional benefits as a school meal.

Name	Meal + price	Commentary from young person
FOOD DIARY 1 – LONDON, 15		
DAY 1: Packed lunch from home	A Cadbury mini roll and a chicken sandwich with mayo in it Cost: not available	<i>'It tasted okay, I eat the same sandwich every day. I didn't feel full or energised after eating it, and felt hungry after an hour.'</i>
DAY 2: Meal from a supermarket	Tesco meal deal: Sushi, a packet of crisps and orange juice. Cost: £3 (or £3.50 without a Clubcard)	<i>'It tasted OK, I'm not the biggest fan of meal deals but I ate all of it and felt full afterwards.'</i>
DAY 3: Fast food outlet	Local chicken shop: 5 fried chicken strips, fries and a drink. Cost: £5.10	<i>'This tasted nice and I felt full after eating it. I don't know why but I felt tired afterwards – I just wanted to lie down and sleep.'</i>

Name	Meal + price	Commentary from young person
FOOD DIARY 2 – LONDON, 15		
DAY 1: Packed lunch from home	A chicken, bacon and cheese panini, with some chicken strips and a juice box. Cost: £3 (estimated)	<i>'It was filling, tasted good and was the right portions, because it's from home and I know what I want to eat and how much. Although it didn't energise me, it did stop me from being tired.'</i>
DAY 2: Meal from a supermarket	Boots meal deal – Katsu Curry Wrap, Fridge Raiders and a sparkling drink. Cost: £3.59	<i>'It was very filling and energising, I chose my favourite items so of course I enjoyed them. It was enough if not a bit too much to eat.'</i>
DAY 3: Fast food outlet	A portion of 2 wings and chips, and a fizzy drink. Cost: £3.50	<i>'The oily wings and crispy chips layered with sauce and salt provide energy but aren't necessarily filling. I think the price helps you feel good about it.'</i>
FOOD DIARY 3 – MANCHESTER, 14		
DAY 1: Packed lunch from home	A burger, waffles and a yoghurt Cost: £1.50 (estimated)	<i>'It tasted good and made me full, although it wasn't the healthiest meal.'</i>
DAY 2: Meal from a supermarket	Asda meal deal – sandwich, Walkers crisps and an Oasis drink. Cost: £2.90	<i>'It made me full. I have had meal deals before and they get quite boring, because of the cold sandwiches.'</i>
DAY 3: Fast food outlet	Mini pizza meal deal – small pizza, fries and a Fanta drink. Cost: £4.99	<i>'It tasted nice and made me full, but I didn't feel good about eating it; it isn't something I should be having after school.'</i>

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'Free School Meals were something my family relied upon – and every child in London deserves that safety net'

SADIQ KHAN, MAYOR OF LONDON, 2022¹⁴⁵

"We know that Free School Meals can have a hugely positive impact on pupils' health, learning and mental wellbeing. It's great to see the scheme will potentially be made permanent in London, but we need to make sure young people across the country are receiving the same level of support."

HUGH FEARNLEY-WHITTINGSTALL, CHEF, 2024

'Clearly something is broken within that Free School Meal system. Trying to get something more robust and solid in place is desperately needed. For many of these kids, a Free School Meal is the only meal they get that's warm'

TOM KERRIDGE, CHEF, 2022¹⁴⁶




'We are in the midst of a crisis where people on low incomes are struggling to put food on the table for their children, so the benefits of Free School Meals are felt more acutely than ever, which is why we were one of the first councils to introduce Universal Free School Meals for primary age children. The benefits of this include: supporting families with the rising cost of living, helping pupils engage in learning, enhancing academic performance, and improving nutrition for children for whom good quality food is often out of reach. Extending Free School Meals to all those in need has to be a Government priority, so the next generation can thrive'

COUNCILLOR JASMINE ALI, DEPUTY LEADER OF SOUTHWARK COUNCIL AND CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE, EDUCATION AND REFUGEES, 2022



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