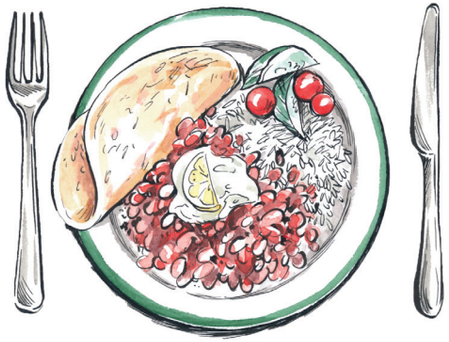


Food Ambassadors

Citizen Researcher Series

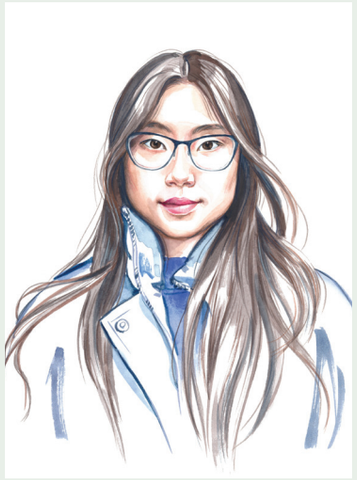
Fixing School Food:

Prices, portions and appeal



by Citizen Researcher, Stephanie

About the researcher



My name is Stephanie, and I'm a young Food Ambassador who cares deeply about making school food fairer, healthier, and more appealing for every student. As someone who eats school meals every day, I've seen firsthand how price, portion sizes, and the lunchtime environment affect young people's ability to learn and feel well.

I started this research because school food has shaped much of my own experiences. Sometimes positively, sometimes not. I've seen friends skip lunch because they can't afford it, or struggle through lessons. After all, the food they bought wasn't filling enough. When I realised how common these experiences were, I wanted to document them properly.

Stephanie is a Food Ambassador and Year 12 student from Newcastle. She is passionate about improving school food, tackling health inequalities, and amplifying young people's voices. She aims to combine lived experience with research to highlight what young people need from the food system and why their perspectives should influence future policies.

This work has been carried out with the support of IMGO Foundation.

The citizens' research was supported by **We Rise**, as well as volunteers from **Ipsos** as part of Ipsos's REACH programme. We Rise specialises supporting research, engagement or creative projects that are led by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Ipsos are a leading global market research company. Ipsos provided an overview of research methodology and gave one-to-one support to the ambassadors as they developed their research projects.

Illustrations: **Petra Kneile** for The Food Foundation
Report design: **Katie White**

Introduction

School food matters. It is an important part of children's health, wellbeing, and ability to learn. Yet for years, young people have been sharing experiences that suggest that provision is not consistently meeting their needs. One of these young people has taken on the role of citizen researcher to investigate what young people think about their school's food.

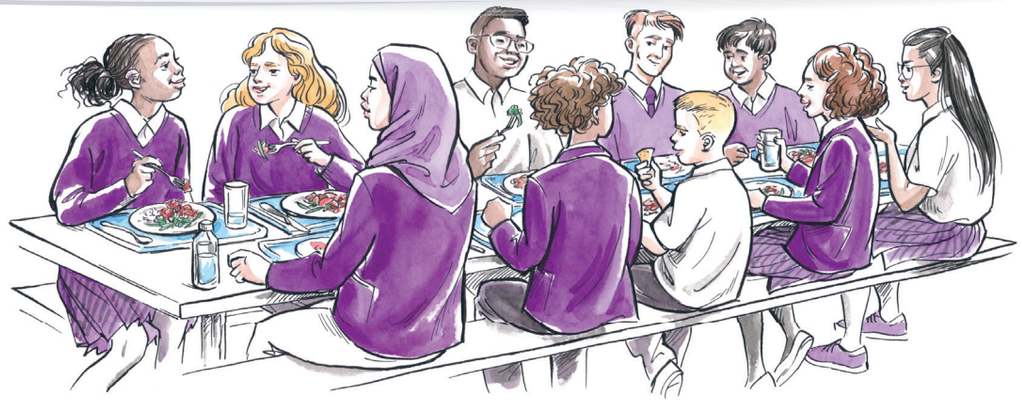
This young person's research project comes at the advent of revised School Food Standards in England, and the opportunity to truly transform school food for the better, not just in England but across the UK. The findings in this report provide important insights into current barriers around price, portions and appeal, and offer ideas from young people to fix school food.

For this research project, Steph, a Food Ambassador and school student, surveyed 22 young people from across Britain* (82% of respondents were based in England, while 14% were based in Wales, and 4% in Scotland). 23% of the respondents were in receipt of free school meals (FSM). Steph's findings provide a small snapshot into young people's experiences of school food, and her research contributes to a wider call from young people on what the issues are and what needs to change.

What young people want to change:

- ☆ IMPROVE AFFORDABILITY: have a maximum charge for school food lunches to ensure they are affordable for all, while also ensuring the FSM meal rate covers the cost of a range of hot meals
- ☆ MAKE SCHOOL FOOD NUTRITIOUS AND APPEALING: school meals need to be both healthy and delicious, made from quality ingredients, with recipes that students feel excited to eat
- ☆ IMPROVE THE LUNCHTIME ENVIRONMENT: make school food more accessible through longer breaktimes, better queue management, and giving students enough time and space to take a proper break
- ☆ GIVE STUDENTS A STRONGER VOICE: Involve students at every level of decision-making, through consultations, recipe-testing, and clear and accountable communication channels between students and those responsible for their school food.

**This survey was conducted in the summer of 2026, after the English Government's announcement of expanding FSM but before implementation. It also took place after consultations on School Food Standards in England, but before the new standards were announced.*



Price and portions are limiting choice



Steph's research found that affordability is the main concern for young people regarding school lunches. Only 9% of respondents considered the price of school food "fair", compared with 59% who disagreed, and 32% who were unsure. Of the students on FSM who ate food from the canteen, 80% said the price was not "fair" and 20% were unsure. Strikingly, this means that none of the students on FSM thought the price was fair. Worries about cost is not surprising given rising food prices and the cost-of-living crisis. UK food prices have increased by 30.5% since 2022 (**Food Foundation, 2026a**), which filters through to school budgets, pushing up canteen prices. However, it is concerning that the majority of students felt prices were not "fair" and particularly that this percentage increased among students on FSM.

An interesting insight from this research is the relationship between price and portion. Many of the young respondents stated that they were not getting enough food for their money: "The portion sizes are too small, and the prices are very high compared to it". Behind these comments lie a number of challenges for young people:

> "The portion sizes are not enough for young people to feel full and energised for a full day. Hot meals are typically bigger and better for young people but in my school, those on FSM can't buy them due to costs. Young people must then make the decision to eat at only either break A or break B and are expected to behave and function to their full potential – even though they are still hungry. The system is unfair."

Another young person shared that they now bring packed lunch

> "since school dinners stopped being free and when the portion sizes became inadequate."

This response was echoed by another young person who said they bring a packed lunch because

> "My household can't afford to put £4 to £5 on my account per day, but we're also not 'meeting the requirements' for FSM."

These responses suggest that young people who are 'just missing out' on FSM are unable to afford lunch at school as the portions are too small for the cost.

In relation to recipients of FSM, 60% said their allowance was not enough for a full meal, while the same proportion said it was not enough to afford the food options they wanted. One young person stated:

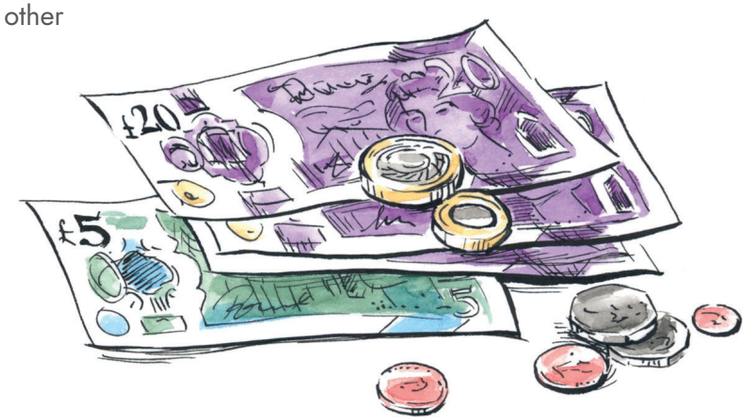
> "My FSM allowance isn't enough for me so I also bring packed lunch from home as well."

Although a very small sample size, it is concerning that these young people are not being served adequate lunches at school and particularly those on FSM who may have no other choice.

As a school student herself, Steph was unsurprised by the findings in her survey: for Steph and many other school students, healthy, filling school food options are not affordable for everyone.

What could be done?

IMPROVE AFFORDABILITY: Have a maximum charge for school food lunches to ensure they are affordable for all, while also ensuring the FSM meal rate covers the cost of a range of hot meals





Students want food that is nutritious and appealing

Steph's research also found that a major barrier to school meal uptake is a lack of foods that students actually want to eat. Just over a third of students said school food does not taste good, while 41% believed it was not nutritious. Half of respondents said that the canteen rarely had food they wanted to eat.

Not only did students report a lack of good quality foods, but the food was also often found to be not delicious, and often unhealthy. The comments linked cost, portion size and lack of healthy options:

> "I think for how little food we get the prices are quite insane, for example 2.50 for a tiny roll and one piece of bacon" or "It is not nice enough or nourishing enough for them to be so expensive."

One student said, "The school food is not healthy and you just mainly have chips and pizza," while another said they bring packed lunches because it allows for "more variety than (what's served) at school." This was backed by multiple calls for more variety in school meals, showing young people's desire for food that is diverse, hearty, and nutritious. When asked what needs to change, one young person simply stated: "Make the meals taste better".

Importantly, 59% of respondents said that what they eat for lunch at school impacts their ability to concentrate in lessons. As one respondent put it:

> "Working on an empty stomach is nigh impossible - and is even more of an issue during exam season if a student cannot afford their lunch and is having to sit an exam in the afternoon, and enduring hunger pangs for the whole duration. But being at least satiated...[is] one less thing to worry about in an already stressful point of their lives."

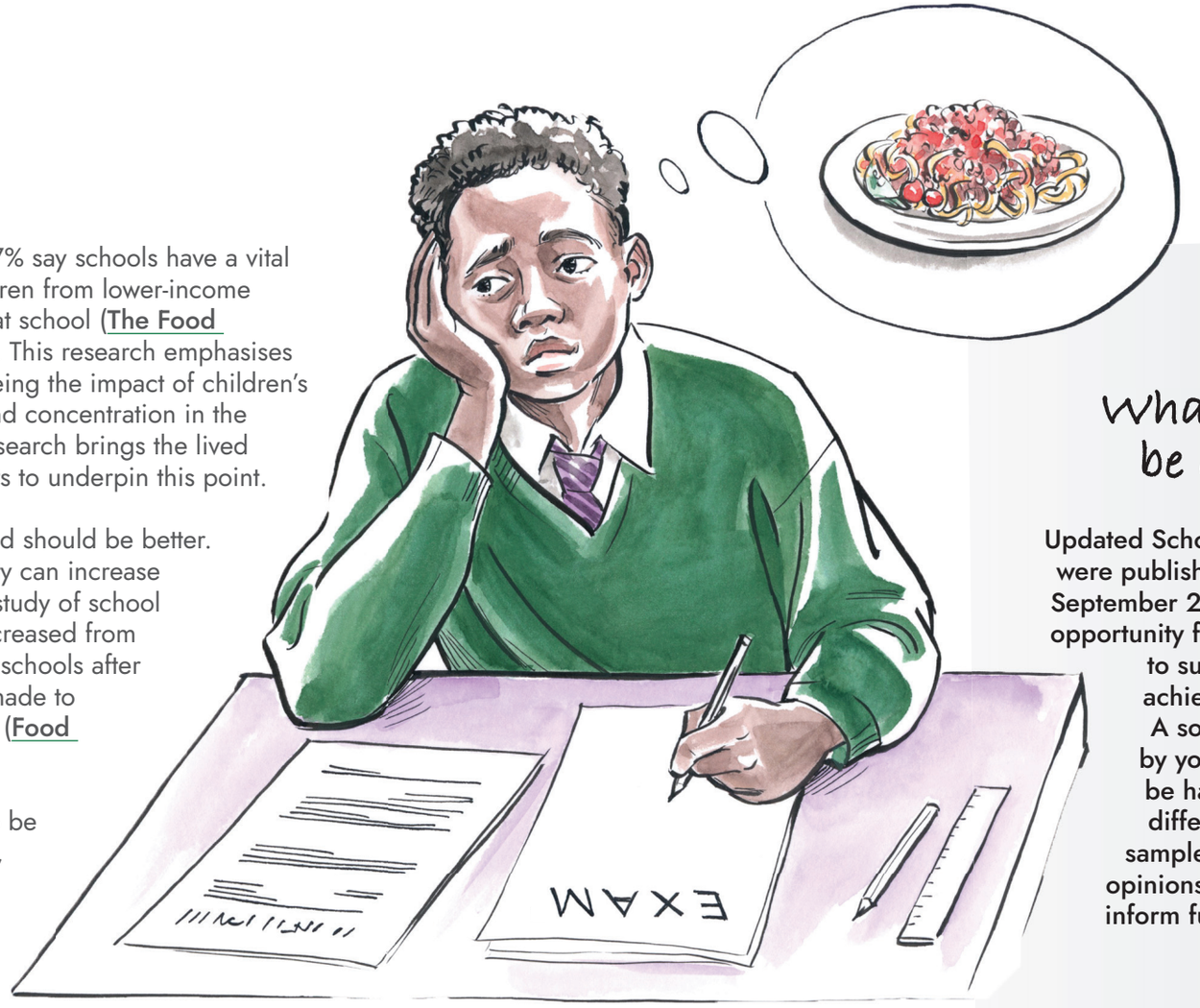
This insight was echoed by other respondents and suggests that school food could have a wider impact on exam outcomes overall. Again, the impact of unhealthy or unappealing school food will be felt most sharply by those on FSM who rely on school lunches.

In a survey conducted by Teacher Tapp on behalf of The Food Foundation of over 6,000 primary and secondary school teachers across England, 80% said unhealthy lunch/break food can lead to disruptive behaviour, 85% say diet affects

concentration, and 87% say schools have a vital role in ensuring children from lower-income families can eat well at school (**The Food Foundation, 2026b**). This research emphasises that educators are seeing the impact of children's diets on behaviour and concentration in the classroom. Steph's research brings the lived experience of students to underpin this point.

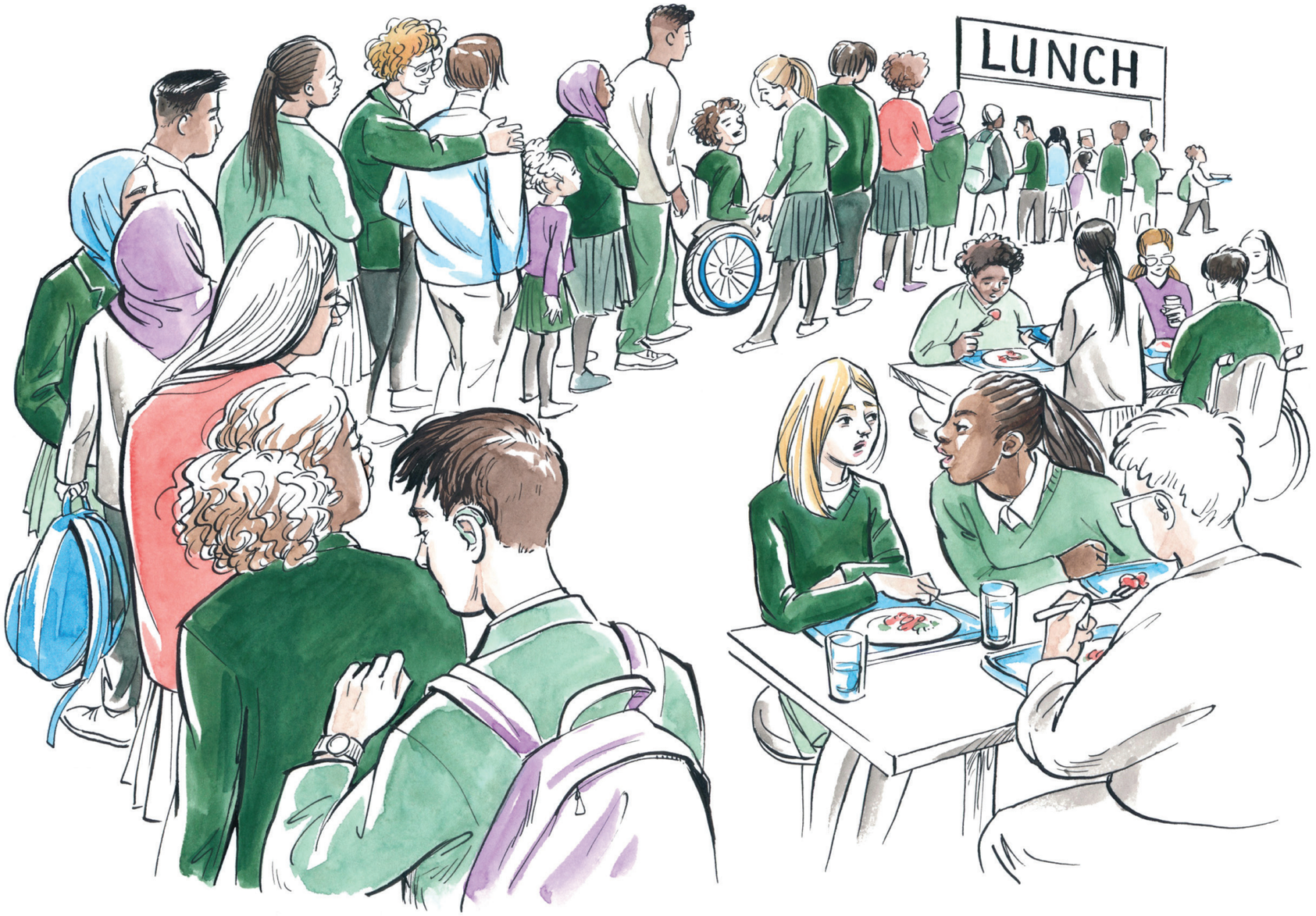
School food could and should be better. Improving food quality can increase demand: in a recent study of school food, meal uptake increased from 28% to 90% in some schools after improvements were made to the quality of its food (**Food Foundation, 2026c**).

School meals need to be healthy and delicious, made from quality ingredients, with recipes that students actually want to eat.



What could be done?

Updated School Food Standards were published for England in September 2026, providing an opportunity for the government to support schools to achieve this objective. A solution supported by young people could be having days where different recipes are sampled, and students' opinions are recorded to inform future provision.


LUNCH

The lunchtime environment creates obstacles for inclusion

Steph also found that the problems with school food extend beyond the food itself. 59% of respondents to the survey identified long queues as a problem at lunchtime, while 55% said the dining hall was too crowded or noisy. A further 36% said there was not enough time to eat. This is backed up further by research from youth campaign organisation Bite Back: in a survey of over 1,800+ students in England, the majority (60%) believed that their lunch breaks weren't long enough to relax, eat, and enjoy their food, with a third (34%) reporting 30 minutes or less for lunch (Bite Back, 2026).

The unwillingness to buy from the school canteen because of long queues and crowding demonstrates how the school environment impacts student choice and should be properly managed to ensure all students have equal access to school food and feel comfortable in doing so. Schools should therefore review queue management, serving capacity, dining space and the amount of time allocated for lunch. Improving food provision without improving access to it risks leaving some students unable to benefit from the changes.



What could be done?

Make school food more accessible through longer breaktimes, better queue management, giving students enough time and space to take a proper break.

Students need a stronger voice

This research has also found evidence of a communication gap between students and those in charge of school menus. Almost three-fifths of respondents lacked a clear understanding of how to raise concerns. Only 14% of respondents agreed with the statement "I feel that my opinions about school food are listened to by the school."

While 60% said they felt neutral when asked if they agreed with the statement "I feel that my opinions about school food are listened to by the school."

Creating clear routes for student feedback could allow schools to identify these problems and respond more effectively.

As one respondent wrote:

> "Let students decide what they want available, not on the day of course, but make an effort to ask students things they would want to eat to incorporate at some point into the meals."



What could be done?

Involve students at every level of decision-making, through consultations, recipe-testing, and clear and accountable communication channels between students and those responsible for their school food. The new requirement for schools to publish a school food policy is an opportunity for this.



Conclusion

The survey identifies four connected areas of opportunity: affordability, food quality, accessibility, and student voice. Making school food more affordable, with improvements in portion sizes and quality, could help to increase school meal uptake. As England introduces updated school food standards and expands FSM eligibility, schools have an opportunity to place students at the centre of these improvements.

This does not only apply to England but can be used as a footprint for all the UK's nations. Learnings should be shared as it shouldn't matter where you are born; **every child deserves a nutritious, tasty, affordable lunch**. Students know what needs to improve; the next step is to turn their insights into practical changes.

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