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## **DEMAND FOR FREE SCHOOL MEALS RISES SHARPLY AS THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON FAMILIES BITES**

### **#ENDCHILDFOODPOVERTY CAMPAIGN**

- New data from the Food Foundation, released as part of the joint #EndChildFoodPoverty campaign with Marcus Rashford, reveals an extremely high demand for Free School Meals this Autumn. The data, acquired through a sample survey conducted by Childwise (1), shows that 29% (equivalent to 2.2 million children) of children aged 8-17 are registered for Free School Meals, with an astounding 42% of these children (900,000) newly registered to the scheme.
- 64% of the newly registered children are from households where the main earners report being in higher income occupations compared to 36% from lower income occupations. This massive increase in demand shows the hard-hitting socio-economic consequences of the Covid-19 crisis, with survey data gathered in August revealing that 32% of households with children have experienced a drop in income since late March (2). This demonstrates how far reaching the impact of the crisis has been for families, with redundancies, loss of income and furlough affecting millions of parents
- A further 21% of children (over 1 million) aged 8-17 (1), as well as 14% of parents with children not currently on the scheme, said they would like to receive Free School Meals (2). 8% of children (over 600,000) said they were worried about not having enough food for lunch at school this term (1).
- Despite this major spike in demand, schools are struggling to provide hot lunches, with only 32% of all children aged 8-17 saying they were eating hot meals from the canteen, and shockingly 3% of children (180,000) saying they skipped lunch entirely. A hot school lunch provides vital sustenance for disadvantaged children, with many relying on it as their main meal in the day. (1)
- Low uptake of school meals by children who pay is likely to also be hampering canteens getting back to normal with hot meal provision. Overall, 50% of children reported taking packed lunches. Less than half (45%) of children reported that their canteens were running as usual with social distancing. 8% of children reported their canteens were closed. 10% of children said most

children have been asked to bring a packed lunch. 21% said canteens were only serving a small number of pupils. Research from the University of Leeds has shown that less than 2% of packed lunches meet nutritional standards (5).

- The new data paints a similar picture for parents of pre-school children, with huge unmet demand for additional support. 42% of parents with children aged 0-3 years old and/or pregnant women weren't aware of the Government's Healthy Start scheme which provides vouchers for fruit, vegetables and milk. Yet demand is undoubtedly there, with 65% of households with pregnant women and/or children aged 0-3 years old who don't currently receive Healthy Start vouchers saying it would make it easier for them to buy more milk, fruit and vegetables for their family. 32% of those say they have a limited budget for food and struggle to afford the fruit, veg and milk they need (2).
- This new data adds to an already bleak forecast with worst-case projections from the Office for Budgetary Responsibility suggesting a rise in unemployment to 13.2% [by the first quarter of 2021](#). This would result in up to 336,500 more working adults being food insecure due to loss of employment and end of furlough in the coming six months (4). Add to this, uncertainty around post-brexite food prices, it is clear that Government must act to prevent a food access crisis.
- The Food Foundation is part of footballer Marcus Rashford's *Child Food Poverty Task Force*, and along with 20 charities and key names in the food industry is calling on Government to allocate sufficient budget to the three National Food Strategy recommendations, as part of an urgent recovery package for vulnerable families and their children this Autumn.

These are:

- Eligibility for Free School Meal (FSM) to be expanded to include every child (up to the age of 16) from a household where the parent or guardian is in receipt of Universal Credit (or equivalent benefits)
- Extend the Holiday Activity and Food Programme (HAF) to all areas in England, so that summer holiday support is available to all children in receipt of Free School Meals.
- Increase the value of Healthy Start vouchers to £4.25 per week and expand the scheme to every pregnant woman and to all households with children under 4 where a parent or guardian is in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent benefits.

*ENDS*

**Marcus Rashford, England International Footballer said** "The numbers recorded here just reinforce the need for urgency in stabilising households. This is a pandemic that could leave longer-term devastation than Covid-19. We must act now to protect the next generation and the most vulnerable across the UK"

**Emma Thompson, Ambassador Children's Right2Food Campaign said** "In the sixth richest economy in the world these figures speak for themselves. There is absolutely no need for any child to go hungry in the UK. The fact that they are and in increasing numbers suggests cracks in a broken food

system that can and must be repaired as a matter of the utmost urgency. Apart from the moral duty we owe to children, this is a severe public health problem.”

**Anna Taylor, Executive Director of Food Foundation said:** “A hot school lunch should provide vital sustenance for vulnerable children. Too many children are missing out because their families can’t afford it. Many more are missing out because canteens are not yet fully operational due to Covid-19. Addressing both should be a top priority for the Government or the divide between children from wealthy and economically disadvantaged families will widen even further, leaving permanent impacts on children’s lives.”

**Stephen Forester, Chair of LACA said:** “LACA’s members have been working hard to resume a full school meals service since schools fully reopened. We understand many school caterers have continued to serve hot meals, sadly others have been stopped completely. We are now concerned about an increasing number of children whose families have been severely impacted by the effects of Covid-19, who need support in accessing a free hot, healthy and nutritious meal at school. It is also important we encourage parents, who can do so, to pay for hot school meals again which will further support the sustainability of the school food service in helping those most in need. This is why LACA have launched our “Hot’ober” initiative which has been created to encourage conversations between caterers, school representatives, on site staff and parents to facilitate the return of hot lunches as soon as everyone feels it is safe to do so.”

**Steve Taylor, CEO Cabot Learning Federation said** “Learning takes energy and requires a child to be physically and mentally prepared: a hungry child is neither. At a time when more families are experiencing new hardships, children are relying on us to advocate for them. A quality daily lunch now will reap significant benefits later.”

**Asha, 14 years old, Cumbria said** ‘With the new regulations in our school, you have to make an order for lunch a whole week in advance, and you have to do it online. This is another barrier for some kids to access a meal at school. If you forget to order you don't get a meal. Also, some families might not have a computer or internet, and so it makes it even harder for them to get a hot meal at school”.

**Dev Sharma, 15 years old from Leicester said** ‘At our school there is no hot food being served in our canteens because they are worried about Covid-19, and 'cross-contamination'. I am really worried some of my classmates are going hungry and this is their only hot meal at the moment. With the pandemic it's more important than ever for kids to get a healthy and hot meal at school. But instead, the canteen's stopped serving. On top of this, we're being forced to sit outside in the cold when having lunch. In the upcoming winter months, when it will be freezing, we won't have access to a good, hot meal.

**Stephanie Slater, Founder/CEO School Food Matters** “This spike in registration for free school meals is alarming and shows us just how many families are struggling as a result of Covid-19. Having endured the misery of lockdown, children need to be back in school with access to a hot, nutritionally balanced school meal. That’s why we’re backing the call for an extension to eligibility for free school meals so that every child is well nourished and ready to learn.”

**Available for Interview**

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- (1) Childwise data was obtained from a survey of 1,064 children aged 7-17 years carried out in the United Kingdom conducted between 8th -20th September. The survey was carried out online and is nationally representative.
- (2) Data referring to parents are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,309 parents or guardians living with children under 18 years. Fieldwork, unless otherwise stated, was undertaken between 24th August and 1st September 2020. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults aged 18+. Data on the Healthy Start scheme was taken from a YouGov survey of 10,845 adults to include pregnant women.
- (3) The method used for deriving population figures is described [here](#).
- (4) Scenarios on the impact of unemployment on food insecurity are described in detail [here](#).
- (5) Dr Charlotte Evans, an expert in diet and health and Associate Professor in the [School of Food Science and Nutrition](#) at Leeds, led the research. She said: “This study underlines the role that parents, carers, the Government and the food industry have in ensuring children eat more healthily .“The research has found that on some fronts, packed lunches have improved but they are still dominated by sweet and savoury snack food and sugary drinks. The vast majority provide poor nutritional quality. Addressing that issue over the next ten years will require a concerted effort.”

## Social Media

Twitter: [@Food\\_Foundation](#)

[#EndChildFoodPoverty](#)

[#Right2Food](#)

## About the Food Foundation

The [Food Foundation](#) is a charity working to influence food policy and business practice, shaping a sustainable food system which makes healthy diets affordable and accessible for all. We work in

partnership with researchers, campaigners, community bodies, industry, investors, government and citizens to galvanise the UK's diverse agents of change, using surprising and inventive ideas to drive fundamental shifts in our food system. These efforts are based on the continual re-evaluation of opportunities for action, building and synthesising strong evidence, convening powerful coalitions, harnessing citizens' voices and delivering impactful communications.

The Food Foundation's [COVID-19 tracker](#) is live, providing analysis of key developments and insights from the front line on how coronavirus is impacting the food system, and how those changes are affecting citizens.

Registered Charity Number 1187611

### **About the Child Food Poverty Task Force**

Formed by footballer Marcus Rashford, the Child Food Poverty Task Force is a group of businesses and charities who, over the coming weeks, will dedicate their platforms to sharing real stories of those most affected by child food insecurity in the UK, supported by real-time statistics. The task force includes Aldi, Asda, Co-Op, Deliveroo, The Food Foundation, Fareshare, Iceland, Kellogg's, Lidl, Marcus Rashford, Tesco, Sainsbury's and Waitrose & Partners.

The intention and objective of the task force is to see sufficient funds from the Chancellor's Budget and Spending Review allocated to implement the 3 policy recommendations – a unifying step to identifying a long-term solution to child food poverty in the UK.