



Feed the Future: MP Briefing

Why the Government must extend Free School Meals to more children

Executive Summary

Free School Meals guarantee children a hot, nutritious meal at lunchtime. They support families with the rising cost of living, help pupils engage in learning, enhance academic performance, and improve nutrition – shoring up the diets of children from low-income households.

800,000 children living in poverty are currently not eligible for Free School Meals. Expanding eligibility to all children in households on Universal Credit would be an effective way to support families that are struggling during the cost of living crisis.

This extension to eligibility is an urgent first step towards a long-term goal for the Government to provide universal, comprehensively funded, nutritious school food.

Who are we?

Feed the Future is a campaign led by a coalition of organisations including The Food Foundation, Bite Back 2030, School Food Matters, CPAG, Impact on Urban Health, Chefs in Schools, Jamie Oliver Ltd and Sustain. This coalition is making the case that Free School Meals should be extended to more children.

We also represent the School Food Review Working Group - a wider coalition of 36 organisations spanning charities, education organisations, catering companies, unions and academics, committed to working together to improve children's health by reforming the school food system.

What policy change do we want to see?

We are calling on the Government to urgently extend the eligibility for Free School Meals.

- All children in state-funded schools in England from families in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent benefits should become eligible for a Free School Meal immediately.
- This extension to eligibility is an urgent first step towards a long-term goal for the Government to provide comprehensively funded, nutritious school food for all children.

How much will it cost?

- Extending school meals to all schoolchildren in England living in families receiving Universal Credit or equivalent benefits would cost an additional **£477 million** in the first year of implementation (accounting for initial set-up costs of £10 million) and **1.4 million additional children** would benefit.¹
- Costs in subsequent years are projected to gradually reduce, in line with projected population changes.

Why must we make school meals fairer?

- The household earnings threshold for children to qualify for Free School Meals is extremely low - less than £7,400². This threshold has remained static since 2018, despite food and drink inflation increasing by 13.1% in the last year alone.³
- 800,000 children do not meet the Free School Meal eligibility criteria despite their household income being so low they are classed as living in poverty⁴. This is increasing food insecurity and worsening health and educational outcomes.
- England's school meal eligibility threshold is the most restrictive of all the devolved nations – Scotland and Wales are introducing Free School Meals for all children at primary level while Northern Ireland's eligibility threshold is twice that of England's (£14,000).

Free School Meals: the evidence

A Free School Meal provides children with a guaranteed hot, nutritious meal at lunchtime. But the policy also delivers many other benefits:

- School lunches help support families with the rising cost of living:
 - Levels of food insecurity among households with children have risen to 25.8% in September, up from 17.2% in April 2022⁵. This represents a total of 4 million children aged under 18 who live in households that do not have access to a healthy and affordable diet.
 - Expanding the eligibility criteria for school lunches assures children at risk of food insecurity one nutritionally balanced hot meal per day, taking pressure off tight family budgets.
- School lunches can help pupils engage in learning and help to improve academic performance.
- School lunches can improve nutrition and shore up the diets of children from low-income households:
 - Obesity rates in Year 6 children increased by 2.6 percentage points between 2019-20 and 2021-22.⁶ Approx 1 in 4 children leave primary school with obesity, and children who live in lower income areas are twice as likely to be affected.⁷

¹ <https://urbanhealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/FSM-Report-Technical-Appendix-1.pdf>

² Annual income of less than £7,400 after taxes and not including benefits.

³ <https://www.foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-prices-tracking>

⁴ [800,000 children in poverty not getting from school meals](#), CPAG, 2022

⁵ <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking>

⁶ <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme>

⁷ <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme>

- Universal Free School Meals have been shown to beneficially affect children's weight.⁸
- School meals are the best option for children's nutrition in school, given less than 2% of packed lunches meet school food standards.⁹
- Free School Meals offer a very strong return on investment.
 - Impact on Urban Health recently commissioned PWC to conduct a cost benefit analysis of Free School Meals in England¹⁰ – the most comprehensive conducted to date. Their analysis shows that extending Free School Meals has a significant positive cost benefit.
 - Extending to all children in households on Universal Credit would result in a benefit of £8.9bn between 2025 and 2045 - this compares to a cost (including CapEx) over the same period of £6.4bn. This means **for every £1 invested, £1.38 is returned**. In addition, wider economic benefits to local economies and supply chains amount to £16.2bn.

Is this a popular policy?

- When surveyed in September 2022¹¹, 87% of the public thought that the government has a lot or some responsibility for helping children – up from 84% in September 2021. 72% of the public supported the expansion of Free School Meals to all children from households in receipt of Universal Credit.
- Support is also high in the education sector – in June 2022 school leaders and education unions representing a million teachers and education specialists wrote to the Government urging an extension to Free School Meals to more children.

The bottom line

Free School Meals provide an essential nutritional safety net, protecting children from food insecurity and improving health and educational outcomes, especially amongst children from lower-income families. Expanding eligibility will help address pervasive inequalities, supporting government ambitions to grow the economy, level up society and improve educational standards.

For further information please contact

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⁸ Holford, A. and Rabe B, (2022). ISER, University of Essex Universal. Free School Meals reduce child obesity and help with the cost of living.

⁹ <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/10/1/e029688>

¹⁰ <https://urbanhealth.org.uk/insights/reports/expanding-free-school-meals-a-cost-benefit-analysis>

¹¹ <https://www.foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/72-public-support-expansion-free-school-meals>