

# Child food insecurity and Free School Meals



## Overview

- In January 2023, the Food Foundation estimated that 24% of households with children were living with food insecurity.
- Food insecurity increases mental and physical health risks (including dental decay and obesity) and affects educational and lifetime attainment.
- Free School Meals (FSM) initiatives require local authorities to provide eligible pupils with nutritious meals on weekdays during term-time. While it is difficult to measure the effect of FSM on food insecurity directly, FSM can provide health, educational and economic benefits.
- Challenges include sufficient funding, achieving high nutritional quality of food, and potential for stigma associated with means-tested FSM eligibility. Some children living in poverty may not receive FSM if they do not meet the means-tested criteria.
- Stakeholders have suggested future policy considerations including revised funding, improved food quality and monitoring, school-wide cultural changes, and expansion of FSM (including to all schoolchildren in families receiving Universal Credit and universal provision to all pupils regardless of circumstances).

## Background

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (UN) defines food insecurity as a “lack of regular access to enough safe and healthy nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life”.<sup>1</sup> Food insecurity can range from uncertainty in obtaining food (mild), through compromising dietary quality and eating patterns (moderate), to having no food for a day or more (severe).<sup>2</sup> Some definitions encompass further aspects, including being able to access food in socially acceptable ways.<sup>3,4</sup>

The UK is a signatory of the UN treaty on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which includes the right to adequate food for all.<sup>5,6</sup> Several government and charity-led initiatives aim to provide food for disadvantaged children, including the national school breakfast club programme,<sup>7</sup> Magic Breakfast,<sup>8,9</sup> and the holiday activities and food programme.<sup>10</sup>

This POSTnote focuses on Free School Meals (FSM) initiatives in England.

## Household food insecurity in the UK

UK food insecurity is mostly due to households’ inability to afford nutritious food, rather than issues of scarcity.<sup>11,12</sup>

The Department for Work and Pensions’ (DWP) Households Below Average Income publication provides data on UK household food security.<sup>\*13</sup> In 2021/22, 7% of people (4.7 million) in the UK were in food insecure households, with a further 6% reporting marginal food security.<sup>13–15</sup> Of households with children, 12% were food insecure, with 5% living with very low food security.<sup>4,13</sup>

DWP-reported food security has remained relatively stable over the past three years,<sup>14,16,17</sup> however other measures suggest an increase (Figure 1).<sup>18</sup> This may be due to differences in [data collection methods](#), time-periods, how food insecurity is measured, and disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>19</sup> Academic stakeholders have argued for more consistent measuring of long-term changes in food insecurity.<sup>20</sup>

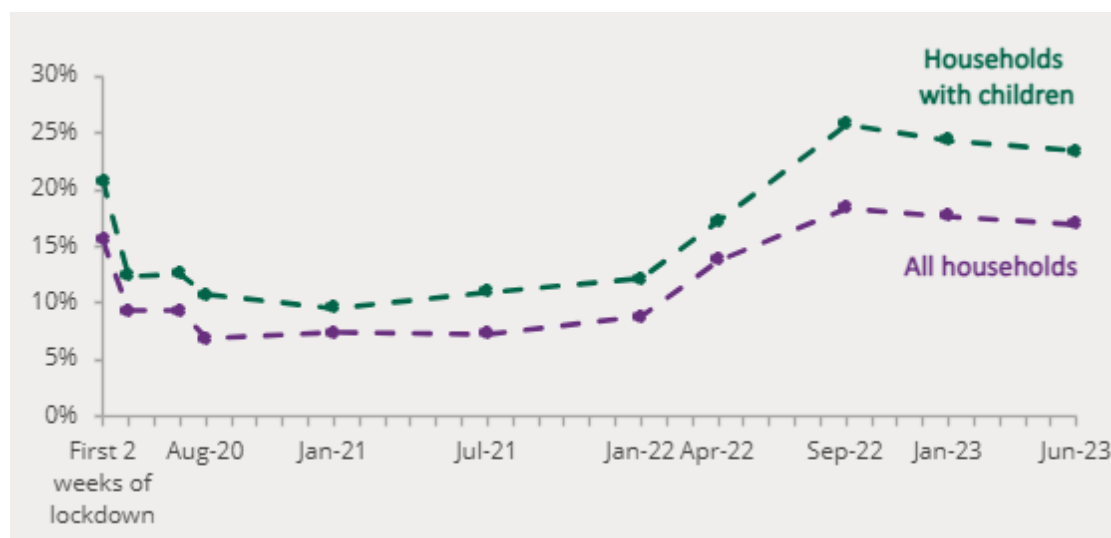
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\* The DWP defines food security, rather than insecurity. The four food security classifications are:

- High: no problem or anxiety in consistently accessing adequate food.
- Marginal: problems at times or anxiety about accessing adequate food, but the quality, variety and quantity of food intake is not substantially reduced.
- Low: reduced quality, variety and desirability of diets, but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns are not substantially disrupted.
- Very low: at times during the last 30 days, eating patterns were disrupted and food intake reduced due to lack of money and other resources for food.

Low and very low food security are categorised as food insecure.

**Figure 1. Percentage of UK households reporting moderate or severe food insecurity in a 1 month recall period**



Source: The Food Foundation, Food Insecurity Tracking Round 13, 2023. The Food Foundation commissions nationally representative surveys with YouGov to track food insecurity in the UK, analysed by The Food Foundation and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

According to the Food Foundation, the percentage of households with children experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity doubled between January 2022 and 2023 to 24.4% (4 million children).<sup>\*18</sup>

Food insecurity rates are generally higher for households receiving income-related benefits, particularly Universal Credit (UC), estimated at 31% (DWP) to 49% (Food Foundation) in 2023.<sup>14,18</sup> Many people in receipt of UC also work, and the Food Foundation estimates 38.6% of all food insecure households to be in employment.<sup>22</sup>

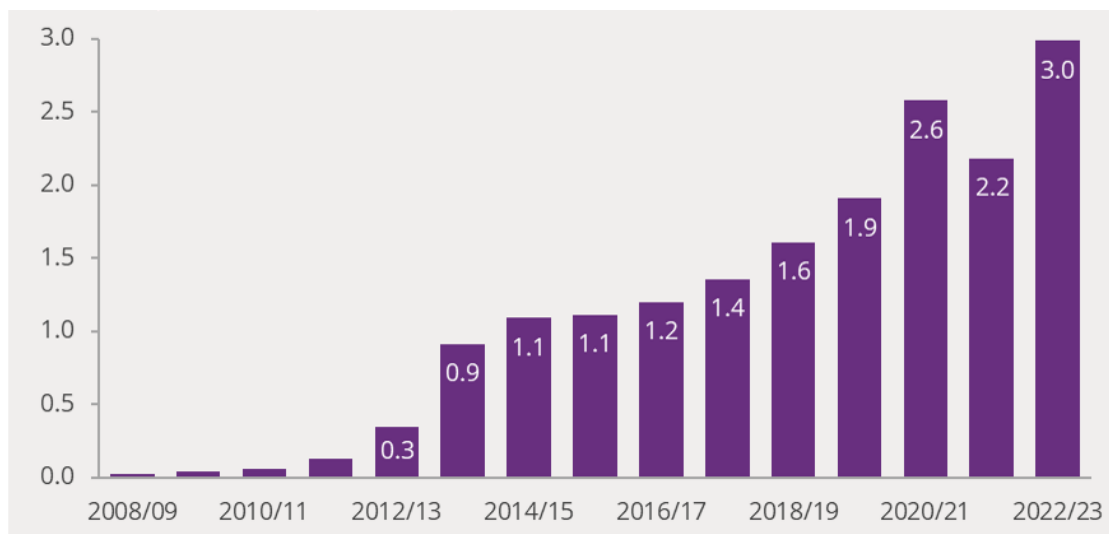
## Food banks

Food bank use has risen over the past decade (Figure 2). The Trussell Trust, the UK's largest food bank network (approximately 60% of food banks),<sup>4</sup> provided almost 3 million three-day emergency food parcels in 2022/23.<sup>23</sup> This is the highest recorded number and a 37% increase on the previous year,<sup>24</sup> including provisions to 760,000 first-time users. Over a third of food parcels were provided for children.<sup>23</sup>

Food bank use is considered an underestimate of food insecurity, as not all food banks are included in statistics and less than half of severely food insecure people use them.<sup>25</sup>

\* These data were based on questions from the United States Department of Agriculture's Food Security Survey module, which uses the FAO definition of food insecurity and similar categorisations.<sup>21</sup>

**Figure 2. The number (in millions) of three-day emergency food supply parcels provided by Trussell Trust food banks in the UK**



Source: Trussell Trust, End of year stats, 2023. These data do not include all distributed food parcels, only those provided by food banks in the Trussell Trust network.

## Financial hardship and nutrition

Families typically compromise spending on food before other less adjustable essential living costs such as rent.<sup>24</sup> In 2021/22, UK households in the lowest income quintile\* needed to spend 50% of their disposable income to afford a healthy diet as described in the Government-recommended Eatwell Guide.<sup>15,26</sup>

Healthy foods are nutritious, and include wholegrains, fruit, vegetables and fish, while unhealthy foods are often ultra-processed,<sup>†</sup> low in fibre, and high in fat, sugar and salt.<sup>28</sup> On average, healthier foods are twice as expensive per calorie than less healthy foods.<sup>15</sup> Food insecure households are more likely to buy cheaper, unhealthy foods (PN 686).<sup>29,30</sup>

To avoid children wasting food, parents may opt for child-marketed foods.<sup>28</sup> While parents may believe them to be healthy choices, in 2023, Action on Sugar found that 92% of yoghurts and 93% of breakfast cereals marketed to children have medium or high sugar content.<sup>15</sup> A 2022 academic study found unhealthy foods and drinks to be further incentivised as they are more likely to be sold with price promotions in British retail stores.<sup>31</sup>

The Government proposed a policy to restrict promotions on unhealthy foods and drinks, including banning unhealthy food multibuy deals, though this has been delayed until October 2025.<sup>32,33</sup>

\* The lowest income quintile refers to the 20% of the UK population with the lowest income.

† Ultra-processed foods include additives and ingredients that are not typically used in home cooking, such as preservatives, emulsifiers, sweeteners and artificial colours and flavours. They tend to have lower nutritional content. Examples include ham, sausages, mass-produced bread and crisps.<sup>27</sup>

Food bank parcels can contain disproportionately higher levels of sugar and carbohydrates compared to UK guidelines.<sup>34</sup> While important in addressing hunger, this can perpetuate a cycle of diet-related health inequalities.<sup>35</sup>

## Rising cost of living

Rising living costs have further exacerbated food insecurity, particularly with rapid increases in food inflation.<sup>4,24,28</sup> Barnardo's found that 23% of surveyed parents in February 2023 struggled to provide sufficient food for their child due to the cost of living, with help supplying food the most requested form of support.<sup>36</sup>

A Food Foundation survey found that in January 2023, 42% of food insecure households bought fewer vegetables, 54% bought less fish, and 57% bought less fruit in the past month due to rising costs.<sup>28</sup> Pre-prepared (often unhealthy) foods such as microwave meals are also more likely to be bought by households in financial hardship.<sup>28</sup> This saves time and requires little storage or cooking facilities, reducing energy costs.<sup>28</sup>

## Health risks of childhood food insecurity

### Malnutrition and obesity

Food insecure children are at higher risk of being under or overweight, largely due to unaffordability of healthy diets.<sup>28,37</sup> Undernutrition can manifest as short stature, more prevalent in deprived children.<sup>15,38</sup>

The Government's Food and Levelling Up Strategies aim to reduce diet-related health inequalities and to halve child obesity by 2030.<sup>39-42</sup>

In England, 1 in 3 children leave primary school overweight or obese, with children in the most deprived regions at over twice the risk of those least deprived.<sup>40,43</sup> Obesity increases risks of related diseases, including type 2 diabetes, and respiratory, musculoskeletal and liver diseases.<sup>44,43,39</sup>

Growing up with food insecurity can teach children to eat when food is available rather than when hungry. This can affect the body's ability to regulate hunger signals, making it difficult to lose weight.<sup>45</sup>

### Dental health

Children from deprived backgrounds are more likely to have poor dental health.<sup>15,46</sup> Consuming sugary foods and drinks, more common in food insecure households, can increase the risk of dental decay.<sup>15,35,47</sup> Food is often prioritised over hygiene products (such as toothbrushes) when households cannot afford both.<sup>48</sup>

Dental decay causes pain and infection, which may persist into adulthood.<sup>49</sup> It frequently causes difficulties with eating, sleeping, playing and socialising, in addition to wellbeing and physical growth.<sup>50,51</sup> Dental decay further causes school absence, affecting educational attainment.<sup>51,52</sup>

## Mental health and wellbeing

Household food insecurity is associated with worse childhood mental health<sup>53</sup> after adjustment for other social risks.<sup>54,55</sup> This includes hyperactivity and inattention, mood and anxiety disorders and aggression.<sup>56</sup>

Children can be aware of parents' stress around food, as parents may sacrifice their own diet to protect their children from hunger (evidenced by interviews with children).<sup>3,57</sup> Children who worry about food show higher rates of negative emotion and self-harm compared with their food-secure peers, even if they are not hungry themselves.<sup>58</sup>

## Government commitments to food in schools

The Government recognises schools as important for children's health and diets, both as food providers and educators.<sup>59,60</sup> The 2013 School Food Plan<sup>\*61</sup> included revised School Food Standards for nutritious food, and introduced Universal Infant Free School Meals (see [FSM eligibility](#)).<sup>62</sup>

The 2022 Government Food Strategy was published in response to the 2020/21 National Food Strategy (an independent, government-commissioned review of England's food system).<sup>42</sup> This and the 2022 Levelling Up White Paper, recognised existing diet-related health inequalities as a barrier to equal opportunities across the UK.<sup>41</sup>

In the strategy, the Government set out to:

- encourage schools to publish statements for their whole school approach to food (healthy, consistent food education and culture in the classroom and dining room)<sup>41</sup> and provide funded training (£200,000) for governors to support this.<sup>41</sup>
- ensure greater compliance to School Food Standards through collaboration between the Department for Education and the Food Standards Agency.<sup>41</sup>
- allocate £5 million funding for a "school cooking revolution", enabling every child to leave secondary school knowing how to cook six recipes to support healthy living into adulthood.<sup>41</sup>

## Free School Meals

In England, the Government requires local authorities to provide eligible and registered state-funded pupils with a weekday nutritious term-time meal (Box 1). This

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\* The School Food Plan is an independent report published by the Department for Education. It sets out how the Government can improve school food and schoolchildren's diets, including eating well at school and the role of cooking and food in schools.<sup>61</sup> It suggests steps to increase take-up of school meals, improve their quality and teach pupils about ingredients and cooking.<sup>61</sup>

aims to ensure children are well-nourished, develop healthy eating habits, and can concentrate, learn and achieve in the classroom.<sup>63</sup>

Schools vary in how FSM programmes operate, from how caterers procure food<sup>64</sup> to how identifiable registered pupils are at lunchtime.<sup>3</sup> Many use e-payment systems for all pupils, which automatically credit accounts with allocated lunchtime allowances. This typically resets daily; which may mean that any underspend or missed meals cannot be carried over.<sup>65</sup>

### Box 1: Relevant legislation for FSM initiatives

- **The Education Act 1996, Section 512** places a duty on maintained schools, academies and free schools to provide FSM to disadvantaged pupils aged 5-16 years who meet the criteria.
- **The School Standards and Framework Act 1998** gives the Secretary of State the power to make regulations setting nutritional standards and requirements for school meals, with a duty on Local Education Authorities and school governing bodies to ensure FSM are in line with standards<sup>66</sup> (currently the Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014).<sup>67</sup>
- **The Welfare Reform Act 2012, Section 457** amends original FSM eligibility to include receipt of newly-introduced Universal Credit and other prescribed circumstances.<sup>68</sup>
- **The Children and Families Act 2014, Section 106** requires state-funded schools and academies to provide FSM on request to all pupils in Reception and Years 1-2 (Universal Infant FSM), which can be extended to nursery provision and all early years settings.<sup>69</sup>

## FSM eligibility

FSM eligibility varies across the UK (Box 2). Some year groups are covered by universal FSM policies, where every child is entitled to FSM regardless of circumstance. Universal schemes include:

- **Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM):** Reception to Year 2
- **Universal Primary Free School Meals (UPFSM):** Reception to Year 6

Otherwise, eligibility is means-tested, and pupils are not eligible if their parents earn above a certain threshold or receive multiple benefits.<sup>70</sup> Unlike universal initiatives, pupils must be registered to receive FSM, requiring parents to submit a claim.<sup>70</sup>

In 2020, eligibility was extended to families with No Recourse to Public Funds (whereby people subject to immigration control are unable to claim most benefits),<sup>71</sup> made permanent in April 2022.<sup>\*63</sup>

## Box 2: FSM eligibility across devolved nations

- England have provided state-funded pupils with UIFSM since 2014.<sup>73</sup> Older children are eligible for means-tested FSM based on household receipt of benefits, including UC with net earned income up to £7,400, and Child Tax Credit with annual gross income of £16,190. Children are ineligible if parents receive both Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit.<sup>70</sup>
- Wales are committed to a phased implementation of UPFSM by 2024, with rollout in Reception complete.<sup>74</sup> Like England, secondary schools in Wales have an eligibility income threshold of £7,400.<sup>†75</sup>
- Scotland provide UIFSM and are halfway through implementing UPFSM. The Government plans to pilot a further extension to universal FSM to include secondary school pupils.<sup>76</sup> Currently, the Scottish threshold for secondary school eligibility is £7,920.<sup>‡77</sup>
- Northern Ireland do not have UIFSM, but a higher means-tested threshold of £14,000,<sup>‡</sup> with a commitment to review eligibility.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>‡</sup> After tax, not including benefits

The Mayor of London announced UPFSM in all state-funded schools in London for 2023/24.<sup>79</sup> Five London boroughs already offer UPFSM;<sup>79</sup> three will reallocate their current UPFSM costs to extend FSM provisions across more school years in response to the new funding.<sup>† 80–82</sup>

## Transitional protections

In 2018, transitional protections were introduced to prevent children from becoming ineligible for FSM during the replacement of benefits and tax credits with UC ([SN-04195](#)). Pupils eligible since April 2018 will remain eligible until March 2025 (irrespective of household earnings), until the end of their current phase of education (primary or secondary).<sup>70</sup>

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\* Income thresholds for eligibility in NRPF families varies with number of children and residence within or outside London, from £22,700 per year for one-child families outside London to £34,800 per year for London-based families with two or more children<sup>72</sup>.

† Southwark will extend secondary school eligibility to include all pupils whose parents receive UC.<sup>80</sup> Westminster will provide universal FSM for Early Years and secondary school pupils up to Year 9, the end of Key Stage 3.<sup>81</sup> Tower Hamlets will provide universal secondary FSM.<sup>82</sup>



## Eligibility trends

In England, the number of children determined as eligible through means-testing has continued to increase since 2017/18, peaking at 23.8% in January 2023 (over 2 million).<sup>83</sup> Increases could be due to many factors including transitional protections.<sup>4</sup>

Eligibility rates vary regionally, with lowest 2023 rates in the South East (18.8%) and highest in the North East (30.4%).<sup>83</sup> Non-mainstream schools have much higher rates of eligibility, including special schools (46%) and pupil referral units (57.8%).<sup>\*83</sup>

In 2023, the Child Poverty Action Group estimated that a third of school-age children living in poverty did not meet the requirements to receive FSM (900,000).<sup>84</sup>

## Government pilot expansion schemes

Between 2009-2011, the Government piloted extended FSM entitlement<sup>†</sup> and UPFSM in three local authorities. These schools were compared to schools in similar areas by the Department for Education in 2012.<sup>85</sup> This pilot introduced extra initiatives at the same time, therefore outcomes cannot be attributed to FSM specifically.<sup>85</sup>

Extended eligibility improved take-up for newly eligible pupils,<sup>85</sup> however universal eligibility improved take-up for both newly and previously eligible pupils.<sup>69</sup> Overall attainment improved under UPFSM, with greater gains for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with lower prior attainment.<sup>85,73</sup>

## FSM eligibility as a proxy for disadvantage

FSM eligibility is used as an indicator of socio-economic disadvantage within academic research and government policy.<sup>86,87,88</sup> Whilst generally considered reliable, it does not include ineligible children living in poverty.<sup>88</sup> A further limitation is that the group FSM represents has changed over time.<sup>89</sup>

FSM eligibility reveals a 'disadvantage gap', whereby non-eligible pupils outperform eligible pupils academically.<sup>90</sup> In 2022, 47% of FSM-eligible pupils achieved a standard pass (grades 4-9 or A\*-C) in GCSE English and Mathematics, compared to 75% of ineligible pupils.<sup>4</sup>

## Funding for FSM initiatives

In England, the provision of UIFSMs and means-tested FSMs costs approximately £1.4 billion a year, not including temporary costs from transitional protections.<sup>91</sup> The one-year London emergency UPFSM scheme has £130 million funding.<sup>79</sup>

While UIFSM is funded through a specific grant, funding for means-tested FSM derives from the wider Dedicated Schools Grant, the main source of income for local

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\* Special schools provide education for children with a special educational need or disability. Pupil referral units teach children who are unable to attend mainstream school (for example, due to a long-term illness or exclusion).

† Criteria at the time (prior to the rollout of UC) included Income Support or Child Tax Credit with an annual income threshold of £16,190. Extended entitlement did not increase income threshold, but additionally included Working Tax Credit.<sup>85</sup>

authorities' schools budgets, which varies regionally ([CBP-8419](#)).<sup>4,92,93</sup> FSM funding is not ring-fenced and schools decide how to distribute funds, meaning that FSM spending varies across schools.<sup>4</sup>

The Government valued FSM at £480 per pupil per year in 2023/24, up £10 from the previous year.<sup>94</sup> Around 2 million pupils were known to be eligible in 2023, which produces a broad estimate of £960 million in means-tested FSM funding for 2022/23.<sup>4</sup>

## Benefits of FSM provision

It is difficult to isolate outcomes of means-tested FSM due to additional demographic differences between eligible and non-eligible groups. Universal initiatives can be evaluated by comparing cohorts before and after introduction, or by comparing similar schools with and without initiatives (see [universal approaches](#)).

While FSM can mitigate food insecurity,<sup>60</sup> direct evidence is limited.<sup>95</sup> The extent of FSM benefits can be influenced by the nutritional quality of meal provisions.<sup>96</sup>

## Learning and attainment outcomes

Academic studies identify a link between improved nutrition and increased academic performance.<sup>97–100</sup> Healthy foods are associated with better learning, concentration, reasoning, memory, self-control and behaviour in children and adolescents,<sup>99,101,102,85,103</sup> in addition to small reductions in school absences.<sup>73</sup>

The quality of food brought from home varies by socio-economic background,<sup>85</sup> and repeated academic surveys of English primary schools suggest less than 2% of packed lunches meet nutritional standards.<sup>104</sup> Children living with food insecurity but not FSM-eligible report lacking energy and falling behind academically.<sup>3,105</sup>

## Economic outcomes

School meal programmes can benefit local economies by creating increased demand for nutritious food, supporting local agriculture and strengthening local food systems.<sup>106</sup> FSM provision can reduce pressure on family budgets,<sup>36,107,108</sup> which may improve household food intake.<sup>60,108,109</sup>

Two recent reports have conducted cost-benefit analyses on the expansion of FSM initiatives: PwC (October 2022, commissioned by Impact on Urban Health)<sup>110</sup> and the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS; March 2023).<sup>91</sup> Together, the reports indicate that large-scale expansion of FSM provision is an economically beneficial investment.

The IFS noted that expanding FSM initiatives to pupils from all households receiving UC provides greater targeted support for the 20-40% of lowest income households,<sup>91</sup> with PwC estimating a cost-benefit ratio\* of £1.38. PwC estimated that extending to universal FSM (nursery through secondary) would yield an estimated cost-benefit ratio of £1.71 in education, employment and health.<sup>111</sup>

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\* This measure predicts the return in core benefits for every £1 invested. This includes savings to schools and families, increased lifetime earnings, and health benefits such as child obesity-related NHS costs. It does not include wider benefits such as the gross value added to the school food economy.<sup>110</sup>

## Current challenges

The capacity and motivation to deliver high quality food with high take-up varies between schools.<sup>112</sup>

### Funding

For 2023/24, UIFSM funding will rise from £2.41 to £2.53 per meal<sup>113</sup> in line with the means-tested rate.<sup>94</sup> These rates do not reflect inflation measured by the Consumer Prices Index (equivalent to £2.87 per meal).<sup>91</sup> One in 7 secondary pupils report their FSM lunchtime allowance is not sufficient for a full meal.<sup>114</sup>

With inflation particularly high for food and energy costs, this shortfall in funding puts further pressure on school budgets.<sup>91</sup> Some schools and local authorities have compromised food quality in favour of cheaper options,<sup>115</sup> changed food delivery methods for cheaper implementation,<sup>107</sup> or increased the price of food for paying pupils.<sup>116</sup>

### Take-up and pupil premium

Schools and local authorities aim to identify and register all those entitled for FSM. Despite this, not every eligible child receives FSMs. Regional under-registration rates have been estimated at 11% (approximately 200,000-250,000 eligible children).<sup>85,117</sup> Barriers to take-up include a lack of promotion of FSM, registration requirements, stigma, and food quality and options.<sup>118</sup>

Schools can claim additional pupil premium funding\* for each pupil both eligible and registered for FSM.<sup>73,93</sup> Therefore, under-registration results in schools receiving less pupil premium funding than they are entitled to. This may be a further risk for universal FSM initiatives, as registration is unnecessary to receive universal FSM, but necessary for pupil premium.<sup>73,107,119,120</sup>

Simplifying registration can increase take-up and access to pupil premium.<sup>107</sup> Sheffield City Council simplified FSM enrolment using an "Auto-Award Process" in 2016, which has since registered a further 6,400 eligible children and led to an additional £3.8 million awarded in pupil premium.<sup>119</sup> Implementing auto-enrolment nationally has been suggested,<sup>121</sup> but this poses practical and legal challenges.<sup>122</sup>

### Stigma and fear of stigma

Young people have reported that receiving FSM can cause them to feel ashamed and identified as poor.<sup>3,114</sup> This stigma often worsens as children age, particularly in secondary schools.<sup>3,118,114</sup>

Many schools make efforts to maintain confidentiality, such as through electronic systems, but FSM constraints can make pupils visible: they may have smaller lunches or eat the same food every day to avoid accidentally exceeding their allowance or being asked to return items.<sup>114</sup>

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\* Pupil premium funding is available through a separate grant to FSM funding. It aims to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, which can be through measures benefiting all pupils, such as the support of high-quality teaching through staff professional development.<sup>86</sup>

## Food quality and options

Governors are responsible for ensuring School Food Standards are adhered to, which are otherwise not monitored.<sup>123,124</sup> One 2022 study found 64% of UK pupils' total school-provided lunch calories to be from ultra-processed foods.<sup>123</sup> This can negate the nutritional benefits of school meals, and the Government has proposed greater accountability in the Levelling Up White Paper, with school food monitoring pilots underway.<sup>41</sup>

Many secondary school pupils find portion sizes too small.<sup>118</sup> Taste, unfamiliar food, and the inability to eat with friends or make culturally safe choices can reduce take-up and encourage less nutritious alternatives.<sup>118,124</sup>

## Policy considerations

### Extending FSM eligibility

The Department for Education aims to support the most disadvantaged pupils with FSM, and are aware of impoverished but ineligible children.<sup>122,125</sup> Their position is that the current criteria "enables children to benefit, while remaining affordable and deliverable for schools".<sup>126</sup>

The 2020/21 National Food Strategy recommended increasing the post-tax earnings threshold to £20,000 to benefit 82% and 71% of children in DWP-defined "very low" and "low" food security, respectively. However, it was noted that this would be expensive (£544 million annually for the first three years of implementation).<sup>127</sup>

In November 2022, over 150,000 healthcare professionals called for urgent FSM expansion to all families in receipt of UC and related benefits in an open letter to the Government.<sup>128</sup> With almost half of UC households in moderate or severe food insecurity, this aims to protect child health and improve nutrition, and help avoid a "health debt" in later years.<sup>18,128</sup> There has also been wide support from teachers and the public.<sup>129,130</sup>

The Local Authority Caterers Association (LACA; the leading professional body representing the school food sector) considers an immediate rollout of this extension to be feasible and without large changes to infrastructure.<sup>131</sup>

### Universal approaches

Academic and NGO stakeholders have advocated that providing universal nutritious school lunches helps to reduce diet-related inequalities, and improves nutritional intake for the majority of pupils.<sup>85,132</sup> Academic stakeholders noted that while nutrition is especially crucial for development in early childhood, secondary pupils are at another important development period during puberty.<sup>133</sup>

Universal approaches can increase take-up for previously eligible pupils, as they can reduce barriers of stigma and registration.<sup>60,73,134,107</sup>

One academic study suggests that UIFSM initiatives can reduce children's bodyweights to a healthier level, largely through the replacement of packed lunches

for children ineligible under means-testing.<sup>135</sup> Another study found small reductions in school absences, particularly for those already eligible for means-tested FSM.<sup>73</sup> Universal FSM could also provide affordable healthier choices in schools with open-gate policies, where it is currently often cheaper to purchase fast food than food in school.<sup>136</sup>

International comparisons and pilot schemes also suggest long-term economic benefits of universal FSM initiatives, both in increased lifetime earnings (particularly for disadvantaged pupils),<sup>100</sup> and wider economic outcomes, such as ill health prevention or sector benefits deriving from universal FSM provision.<sup>108,91,110</sup>

However, universal provision carries significant costs. IFS project that universalism (reception through secondary) would cost over £2.5 billion per year.<sup>91</sup> Universal provision also carries “deadweight costs” (meals that parents would have otherwise paid for), which can reduce cost-effectiveness.<sup>85</sup> Some stakeholders have concerns about future funding levels,<sup>137</sup> which, if insufficient, could affect nutritional quality and the associated benefits (such as improved learning and attainment outcomes<sup>85</sup>).<sup>97–99,100,138</sup>

## Food quality and monitoring

Many stakeholders suggested improved monitoring and accountability of School Food Standards, ensuring they work as intended for schools to offer tasty, nutritious menus,<sup>41,61,139</sup> encouraging take-up and ultimately aiding the school food economy.<sup>110</sup> Young people noted that without good food, it is harder to stay healthy, concentrate in school and perform in exams.<sup>140</sup>

Some NGO stakeholders suggested the inclusion of school food quality and environment criteria in Ofsted assessments, and others have called for a wider review of school funding with a long-term vision for a thriving school catering sector. Many identified the need for FSM budgets to reflect food and operations costs, particularly with respect to inflation.

Multiple organisations and campaigners note that school food procurement is complex with widely varying methods and costings. They suggested improved transparency, accountability and consistency across all stages of funding and procurement would enable better understanding of the school food system, comparisons of methods and value, and quality assurance.<sup>139</sup>

## A whole school approach to food

A whole school approach recognises school food as more than hunger and promotes a healthy culture around food through food education and provision using cooking and growing as ways to teach subjects across the curriculum. It places value on school food staff and involvement of pupils and the wider community.<sup>141</sup>

Adopting an evidence-based whole school approach to food is raised by many NGO stakeholders to ensure consistency between food education and culture and food offered in schools. This approach is also supported in the Government’s Levelling Up White Paper).<sup>41</sup>

Many stakeholders expressed how the priorities of school headteachers make the most impact in the success of this approach.<sup>61</sup>

Some stakeholders suggested more eating and socialisation spaces<sup>142</sup> or 'grab and go' systems<sup>143</sup> as particularly positive for secondary pupils, which could further help dining hall capacity in schools with both primary and secondary pupils.

The opportunity to work with pupils, caterers and local agriculture was noted, particularly with respect to supporting local and sustainable food systems.<sup>139,141</sup>

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