



Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) – FAQ



Where will the money come from, can we afford UFSM?

Free School Meals (FSM) are funded by the government. Research estimates that providing FSM for all children across the UK would cost an additional £1.8 billion annually, plus one-off infrastructure expenses for kitchen upgrades and staffing.¹ This investment in children's health and wellbeing would present huge returns – the evidence tells us that for every £1 invested in school food for all, £1.71 is returned, and when wider benefits are considered, UFSM would generate £99.5 billion for the economy over 20 years.² These benefits include savings for families, schools, and the NHS, as well as improvements in health and education outcomes.

Are FSM the same across the UK?

Each of the devolved nations has responsibility for its own Free School Meals (FSM) policies, meaning different groups of children are eligible for FSM in different parts of the UK:

- In England, universal FSM are provided for infants (reception, Year 1, and Year 2 pupils). From Year 3 and above, means-tested FSM are available for children in families with earnings below certain thresholds, such as £7,400 for Universal Credit.
- In Wales, UFSM are being rolled out for all primary school children. Beyond primary school, means-tested FSM have similar thresholds to England.
- In Scotland, UFSM are currently available for Primary 1 to Primary 5 pupils, and the Scottish Government has committed to rolling out UFSM to all primary school children. Means-tested FSM have slightly higher thresholds compared to England and Wales.
- In Northern Ireland, there are no UFSM, but the earnings thresholds for means-tested FSM are higher, such as £14,000 for Universal Credit.

Why can't we just expand free school meal eligibility to include everyone on Universal Credit?


Currently, children in families receiving Universal Credit in England are eligible for free school meals if their household earnings are below £7,400 per year (after tax and excluding any benefits). This threshold leaves many families on Universal Credit ineligible for the support. Expanding free school meal eligibility to include everyone on Universal Credit would be a helpful first step, but ultimately inadequate, as many children living in households with food insecurity would still be unable to access FSM.

Universal entitlement also helps reduce the stigma experienced by children who would otherwise receive means-tested free school meals. Parents and school staff often point out that means-testing can isolate students, making them feel excluded.

¹ [Fixing Lunch- The case for expanding free school meals.pdf \(cpag.org.uk\)](https://www.cpag.org.uk/fixing-lunch-the-case-for-expanding-free-school-meals.pdf)

² [Impact on Urban Health FSM-Executive-Summary.pdf \(urbanhealth.org.uk\)](https://www.urbanhealth.org.uk/impact-on-urban-health-fsm-executive-summary.pdf)





Aren't Universal Free School Meals just helping families who can already afford it?

Universal Free School Meals ensure that every child has access to at least one nutritious meal a day, regardless of their family's financial situation. While addressing food insecurity for vulnerable children should be the top priority for any immediate expansion of school food, school meals are essential for all children's educational experience. School lunches provide the energy needed for learning and serve as an important social occasion during the school day.

Beyond the financial benefit, universal entitlement enables families to invest more in their home lives, fosters stronger relationships between parents and schools, and gives children the emotional security needed to succeed in their education. UFSM have also been shown to support wider efforts to improve the profile of healthy eating in schools, better engage parents and pupils, and develop the school food curriculum – all of which can play a crucial part in forming lifelong healthy eating habits.³

It's a parent's responsibility to feed their child, why should it be up to schools?

Not all families have the same resources or circumstances. By offering meals at school, children are guaranteed at least one healthy meal a day, which is vital for their health, development, and academic performance. From a public health standpoint, schools are in a unique position to provide balanced, nutritious meals that some children may lack at home. This can help address childhood obesity and other diet-related health issues. Additionally, providing school meals can be more cost-effective than other forms of welfare support, streamlining assistance and ensuring it directly benefits the children.

The food at my child's school is poor quality, even if it was free I'd still rather make them a packed lunch.

Millions of children enjoy a high-quality, hot school lunch daily, prepared by dedicated school cooks and chefs. While quality can still be improved in some cases, the majority of school meals provide significantly better nutrition, including fresh fruit and vegetables, than the average packed lunch. Since 2006, School Food Standards⁴ have been in place for cooked lunches and were updated in 2015 to limit confectionery, savoury snacks, and soft drinks, while ensuring meals include vegetables, protein, and dairy. In contrast, a 2016 study of packed lunches found that despite a slight improvement in nutrition since 2006, only 1.6% of packed lunches met the nutritional standards required for school food.⁵


Our caterers are already overstretched, how will UFSM help?

Expansion to universal school food could have a significant positive impact on the catering sector as long as the right timeline and support mechanisms are in place. It's true that many school caterers are already facing significant challenges, such as staffing shortages and rising costs. However, Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) can help address these issues in several ways. The introduction of UFSM typically brings additional government funding, which supports the hiring of additional staff and upgrades to kitchen facilities. With all students receiving free meals, the need for means-testing and managing eligibility is also eliminated, which reduces the administrative workload.

³ [Evaluation of Universal Infant Free School Meals - The Education Policy Institute \(epi.org.uk\)](https://www.epi.org.uk/evaluation-of-universal-infant-free-school-meals)

⁴ [School food standards: resources for schools - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/school-food-standards-resources-for-schools)

⁵ [e029688.full.pdf \(bmj.com\)](https://www.bmj.com/content/352/e029688.full.pdf)





How will the quality of school food be ensured?

The UK has mandatory School Food Standards that all maintained schools, academies, and free schools are required to follow. These standards outline the types of food that should be served and the frequency, promoting a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, while restricting foods high in fat, sugar, and salt. Food for Life provides a framework for verifying that School Food Standards are being met, helping school governors fulfil their statutory duty to gather evidence of compliance.


Additionally, a key factor in maintaining and improving the quality of school meals is ensuring sufficient funding within the school food system to cover both quality ingredients and staff training. The economics of school food operate in a virtuous cycle: the more meals a kitchen produces, the more efficiently they can be made. Expanding Free School Meals (FSM) would relieve financial strain on parents, guarantee that children a healthy meal each school day, and reinvest funding into the school catering system to support higher-quality meals.

A lot of currently eligible children don't claim their free school meal, so how will uptake be increased?

Increasing the uptake of Free School Meals (FSM) among eligible children is crucial. Strategies to achieve this include auto-enrolment and simplifying the application process through online forms, which can help reduce barriers to uptake and ensure fairer access to essential nourishment for children. Schools can also boost uptake by reducing stigma, including by implementing anonymous systems such as cashless payment methods. Raising awareness is also key, as many parents may not know about their eligibility or the benefits of FSM; schools and local authorities can use campaigns, letters, and social media to spread the word.

School food quality also plays an important role – FSM can be made more attractive by improving menus and ensuring meals are culturally appropriate, including by involving students in menu planning and proactively addressing the social, cultural, and environmental aspects of dining.

Why can't I just pack my child a healthy lunchbox?



You can absolutely pack a healthy lunchbox for your child. Many parents prefer this option for various reasons, such as having control over what their child eats and catering to specific dietary needs or preferences. However, school-provided meals offer their own benefits. They adhere to specific nutritional standards, ensuring children receive a balanced diet, and provide opportunities for social interaction, as eating the same meals as their peers can help children feel included and connected. School meals also offer convenience, saving busy families time and effort in meal planning and preparation.

