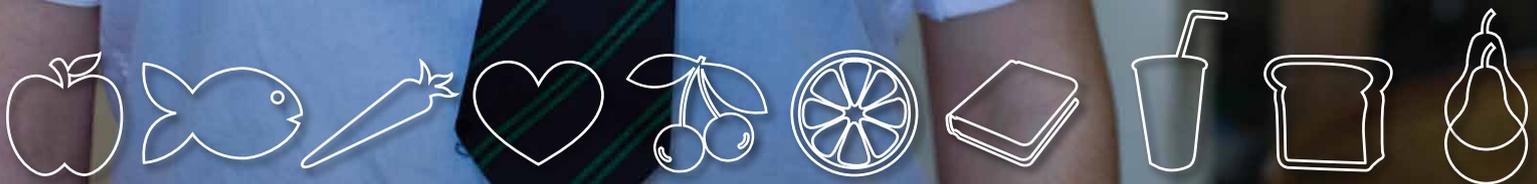




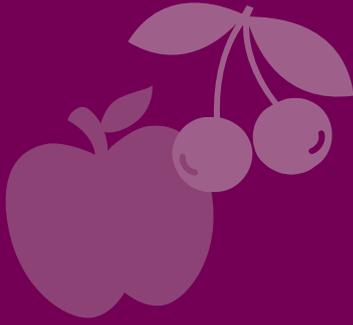
Free school meals
for all children
in poverty



A better childhood. For every child.

www.childrenssociety.org.uk

Introduction



In England, 1.2 million school children in poverty do not get free school meals. 700,000 of them – often from poor, working families – aren't even entitled to this key support. The remaining 500,000 are put off claiming both by systems that clearly single out those receiving free meals, which can lead to teasing and bullying, and by the poor quality of some of the food on offer.

This is simply unfair. With the introduction of the new benefit system, Universal Credit, in October 2013, the government has a once in a generation opportunity to make sure that all children in poverty can get these meals.

As our report will show, giving children in poverty a free school meal makes sense on every level. They can help children stay healthy and learn. And they can help families escape the poverty trap faced by parents trying to move into employment by making sure that work always 'pays'.

The Fair and Square campaign wants every one of the hundreds of thousands of children living on or below the poverty line to be able to get a free and nutritious meal every day.



What needs to change?

'Child liked the meals when he was entitled to them. Now he just has a bread roll if I don't have the full money.'

Parent

- We want the government to grasp the unique opportunity offered by the introduction of a new benefits system and make sure every child in poverty can get a free school meal by extending entitlement to all children in families receiving Universal Credit.
- All schools should have systems in place so that the children who receive free school meals are not singled out. This would help tackle the issues around teasing and bullying, which stop some children from taking up their meals.
- The government should review the extent to which schools are adhering to the nutritional standards for school food.

How do free school meals work?

- Free school meals are available to children from the lowest income families.
- They are worth on average about £10 every week, or around £370 per year, per child.
- Eating a school meal helps children to stay healthy and improves behaviour and learning.
- Getting free school meals often means children can also get help with school clothing allowances, school trips, music lessons and access to leisure centres.

What is the problem?

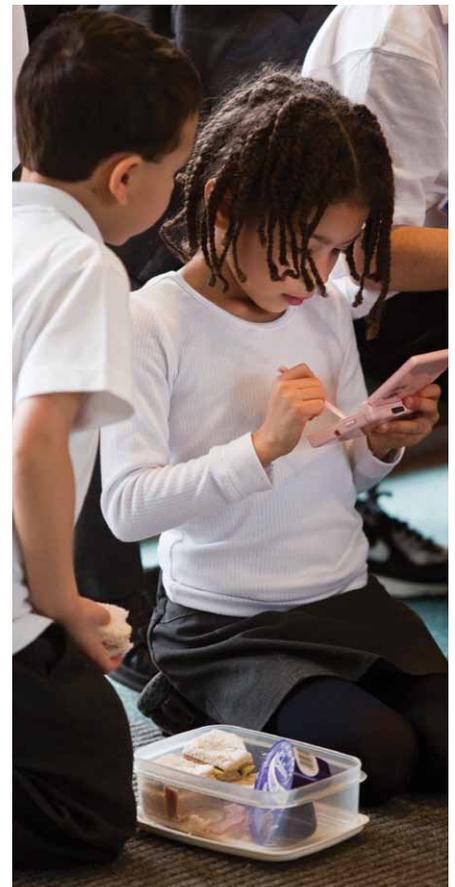
We know that half of all school aged children living in poverty in England – that's 1.2 million – miss out on a nutritious and healthy meal every day.

700,000 children – around a third of the 2.2 million school-aged children living in poverty in England – aren't even entitled to them. This is because their parents are in paid work. Children of parents working 16 or more hours per week¹ are not entitled to a free school meal – regardless of how little the parents earn.

Another 500,000 don't take up their entitlement. This often is because of the quality of meals and issues of teasing and bullying.

The current situation could become even worse under the Universal Credit benefit system. Some families could find that they are worse off if they take on more hours, or get a pay rise, as a result of the loss of free school meals.

Our analysis indicates that this could indeed affect 120,000 families with 350,000 school aged children.²



The cost of not getting free school meals

Free school meals on average are worth nearly £10 per school week/child, or about £370 over a year. The prospect of losing this benefit creates a massive barrier for parents if they want to move into work or take on additional hours, particularly if they have more than one child in school. One parent surveyed said:

'When I move into paid work my income will be lower - school lunches are yet another thing to worry about.' **Parent**

Nearly half of the parents we spoke to are worried about the financial implications of moving back into work or taking on additional hours. Six out of 10 parents say that free school meal eligibility has an impact on their decision to move back into work, or work more hours.

For many children, getting free school meals also means that they can get help with school clothing allowances, school trips, music lessons and access to leisure centres, which also helps families struggling with rising costs and reduced incomes.

Jennifer

Jennifer is a single mother with four children, three of them in primary school and she receives free school meals for these children.

The children get a healthy cooked meal at school every day and that is their main meal of the day. During school holidays, Jennifer finds it very expensive to pay for three extra lunches per day and her weekly shopping bill goes up by around £30-£40.

Nancy and Mark

Nancy and her partner have three children and are both out of work. For their children the school lunch is the main meal of the day.

Nancy is concerned about stigma. The children at her oldest son's school who receive free school meals get a token to hand in so they are clearly identifiable. The school was even thinking of introducing staggered lunches with children getting free school meals going into the canteen first.

She believes all children should get free school meals as it would guarantee all children get a good meal and:

'If every child had a free school meal then there would be no stigma because everyone would be the same – the children see the differences.'

The stigma around getting free school meals

We know that many children who are entitled to free school meals do not eat them every day, often because of teasing, bullying and fear of stigma. This is a major concern for many parents:

'My older children have had free meals in the past and have been bullied as a result.' **Parent**

How much parents worry about teasing and bullying varies. Parents of primary school children were less

worried than those of secondary school children. This is because fewer primary schools use cash based systems and so younger children are less likely to be aware of who does and does not receive free school meals.

'My child enjoys most of his school meals. He's becoming aware that not everyone gets them free though, and this is a cause for embarrassment - if the school could come up with a system where everyone had a lunch ticket, paid for in advance, that would save a lot of heartache.' **Parent**

What is clear is that both parents and children prefer 'cashless' systems where children who get free school meals cannot be identified – such as a card based or biometric system.

One parent said:

'As we have a cashless system other kids need never know my kids have free school meals. They are a godsend and I would really struggle without them.'

Today, only about half of all secondary schools use these systems.

Are free school meals good enough?

The nutritional value and range of meal options available to children in schools varies. Some of the parents we spoke to said:

'I don't think the school is providing enough healthy options.'

'The school meals are high in fat and less likely to be healthy for my children.'

Some parents were also concerned that there is very limited choice for those receiving free school meals:

'In secondary schools there is often a large choice of meals available - but only one choice for free school meals (the 'meal-deal'). Not very fair for the child.'

Jo

Jo is a single mother with two children. Her daughter is six and receives a free school meal. Her son is four and begins school in September.

Jo desperately wants to get back to work.

'I used to work in the City. I want to work again but it's really difficult at the moment... my (job centre) case worker tells me I'm better off staying on benefits right now, that I'd be worse off working. He said that if I earn £80 a week, I'll only see £20 of it because I'll lose other benefits.'

She says she'll have to earn far more than school meals cost to make up for losing them. Her children would also lose the main meal of their day.

'If I return to work, I won't get home until half past six. The children go to bed at seven o'clock. I'm just not going to have time to cook for them and make sure they've got something to eat.'



How much would this cost?



As we've shown, making sure that all children in poverty can get a free school meal makes sense for both children and parents as well as the government.

Under the new benefit system, unless all children living in poverty can get a free school meal, many families will lose money when taking up work or working more hours. Just like child benefit eligibility, families would be better off earning less.

Free school meals are an effective way to both help struggling working families and help guarantee that work always 'pays', so that more parents are encouraged to go back to work and to use employment as a route out of poverty.

Giving free school meals to all children in families in receipt of Universal Credit would cost about £500 million per year.

In order to reduce the cost of this proposal, low income, working parents, who are not entitled to free school meals, could be asked to contribute to some of the cost.³ This would mean receiving a heavily subsidised meal, rather than a free meal, and would bring the bill down to £290m.

How can we calculate this?

- The figures in this briefing are based on our report 'Fair and Square: The future of free school meals' which can be found at www.childrensociety.org.uk/fairandsquare
- The findings of this report are based on data from the Department for Education, HM Revenue and Customs and the Department for Work and Pensions.
- It also draws on findings from an online survey, carried out by The Children's Society, of 140 parents who were or recently had been entitled to free school meals.

What does the public think?

The public recognises that the current system is unfair and there is overwhelming support for giving children in low income, working families free school meals.

Latest statistics⁴ reveal that 91% of people believe that free school meals should be available to all children in poverty, including those in working families.

What is Universal Credit?

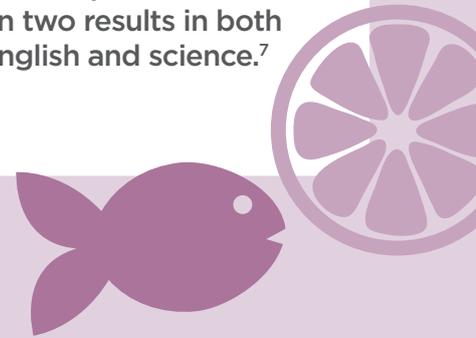
- The government is changing the benefit system.
- Many benefits will be replaced by a new benefit called the Universal Credit starting to be introduced from 2013.
- As a result, the criteria under which children qualify for free school meals will also have to change.

How healthy free school meals can improve children's health

- Children from poorer backgrounds are more likely to have a bad diet – eating fewer vegetables and more processed meats and sugar – than children from higher income groups.⁵
- This can have serious health implications. If children do not have a healthy, balanced diet they are more likely to suffer from obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, cancer and heart disease.
- For some children their free school lunch may be the only healthy cooked food they get. And, for a third of children whose parents we spoke to, lunch was their main meal of the day.

How healthy school meals can help children do better in school

- Eating a healthy school meal can improve children's concentration during afternoon lessons and improve classroom behaviour.⁶
- An evaluation of Jamie Oliver's 'Feed Me Better' campaign, which focused on improving the quality of school meals served in the London Borough of Greenwich, found that it had a positive effect on two results in both English and science.⁷



How you can help

We want the government to change the criteria for free school meals so all children in poverty can get them. The government is much more likely to listen if they understand how many people think the situation is unfair and should change.

Taking part is easy – it can take as little as five minutes. If thousands of us all do something small, that could add up to a big change for our poorest school children.

- Sign up to support the campaign and find materials and ideas by visiting www.childrensociety.org.uk/fairandsquare
-  Join our facebook group – www.facebook.com/childrensociety Then share information about the campaign with friends and family on facebook, asking them to sign up too.
-  Spread the word on twitter. Use [#FairandSquare](https://twitter.com/FairandSquare) and ask your followers to sign up and follow us [@childrensociety](https://twitter.com/childrensociety)
- If you are a company, organisation or society and would like to support the campaign contact us on campaigns@childrensociety.org.uk

Every action counts. Thank you.

The Children's Society

The Children's Society wants to create a society where children and young people are valued, respected and happy. We are committed to helping vulnerable and disadvantaged young people, including children in care and young runaways. We give a voice to disabled children, help young refugees to rebuild their lives and provide relief for young carers. Through our campaigns and research, we seek to influence policy and perceptions so that young people have a better chance in life.



The difference we make to children's lives would not happen without your support. Help us build a better childhood for every child.

We hope you've been inspired to support our campaign as shown on page 7. For more information on how you can help us to make sure that all children in, or on the edge of poverty can receive free school meals, please visit us at: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/fairandsquare You can also find the full policy report and this campaign report on our website.

Notes

1. 16 hours per week for single parents and 24 hours for couples.
2. FRS analysis, figures based on a £7500 earnings threshold for free school meals entitlement.
3. Parents would contribute approximately £3.25 every week from their Universal Credit entitlement in return for about £10 worth of free school meals for their child.
4. GK NOP poll for The Children's Society. UK, all adults 16+, 1000 respondents, Feb 6 2012
5. Nelson, M., Erens, B., Bates, B., Church, S., Boshier, T. (2007) *Low Income Diet and Nutrition Survey* London: Food Standards Agency)
6. School Food Trust (2007) *School lunch and behaviour: systematic observation of classroom behaviour following a school dining room intervention*; School Food Trust (2009) *School lunch and learning behaviour in primary schools: an intervention study*; School Food Trust (2009) *School lunch and learning behaviour in secondary schools: an intervention study*
7. Belot and James (2011) *Healthy school meals and Educational Outcomes*, Journal of Health Economics 30(3), 489-504

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