



NOURISH EVERY CHILD

A dietetic vision for universal
free school meals in primary schools.



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Foreword

Poor nutrition in childhood often leads to poorer health both in childhood and later in life, placing an additional burden on health and care services, which is entirely avoidable. Universal free school meals for all primary school children needs to be considered as an essential provision for the health, social, physical and cognitive development of children in both the long and short term.

Currently, we have high levels of obesity and food insecurity in the UK, and the provision of free school meals is a postcode lottery. Current eligibility criteria means that around a third of children living in poverty in the UK do not qualify for free school meals. As a result, too many children are going without the nutritious food they need to thrive.

School lunchtimes should be an inclusive, social experience for all children and be considered as a key part of the school day, both in terms of the nutrition provided and the social and educational benefits of enjoying nutritious food together. Dietitians and other healthcare professionals can play a key role in highlighting the issues and benefits and continuing to raise awareness of the importance of providing free school meals for every primary school age child.

Implementing a universal provision will create an inclusive environment where good nutrition is the standard rather than the exception. There is already evidence of the success of implementation schemes in London and Wales - feeding bodies, minds and unlocking potential.

This paper will outline the dietetic case for free school meals, and the far-reaching benefits of universal provision. It is essential we embrace the free school meal as a cornerstone of health prevention in the UK; the health of our children is too important not to.

Clare Thornton-Wood

Principal dietitian and free school meals campaign media spokesperson



Introduction

Nourish every child: A dietetic vision for universal free school meals in primary schools

What children eat shapes how they grow, think and learn. School meals have the power to fuel curiosity, sustain attention and nurture wellbeing throughout the day, providing nourishment to support both body and mind. A quality free school meal does more than fill a plate, it gives children access to diverse food every school day, in an environment where every child feels included and inspired to eat well.

For hundreds of thousands of children across the UK, a free school meal may be their main or only source of hot, nutritious food. The British Dietetic Association (BDA) firmly believes that free school meals should be universally available to all primary school children, regardless of income.

This paper has been developed by the BDA's Free School Meals Campaign Working Group, comprised of passionate and skilled dietitians who work in various capacities supporting school food, and led by the BDA Policy and Campaigns Officer. It has been informed by the wealth of incredible evidence and research undertaken by charities, research organisations and campaign teams across the UK and Europe, all of which have engaged with those who this policy could impact the most – children across the four nations of the UK.

Universal primary free school meals

The BDA campaign for free school meals focuses on expanding universal free school meals to all primary aged children, because primary school is arguably the most formative period for shaping children's eating habits, social behaviours and long-term health. Practically, they often have simpler catering operations and more consistent meal uptake, making universal provision easier and faster to implement at scale, which would provide a strong model for expanding into secondary schools as a priority after all children at primary level receive a universal free school meal in the UK.

1

The case for universal primary free school meals



Access to free school meals is a postcode lottery

As of Autumn 2025, no two nations in the UK have the same access or eligibility criteria for free school meals. Children in Wales and Scotland have the widest access to free school meals but in Northern Ireland and England it is more restrictive. There are some exceptions however, as school meal provision is managed by individual local authorities or boroughs. As an example, since 2023, every primary aged child in state-funded schools in London has accessed universal primary free school meals.

Nation	Universal free school meals	Means tested free school meals (including credit threshold)	School food quality guidance
England	Reception - Year 2	Year 3 onwards with those earning below £7,400 per year after tax Commitment: from 2026, all children from families in receipt of Universal Credit	The School Food Standards, which applies to all maintained schools, academies and free schools. The guidance was last updated in 2014 and is due to be updated in 2026.
Northern Ireland	None	All year groups, with families earning below £15,000 per year after tax	Northern Ireland is currently reviewing its 'Nutritional Standards' for schools, funding dependent. They were last updated in 2008.
Scotland	Primary 1-5	Primary 6-7, for families with earnings below £850 per month after tax, and/or in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment	'Nutritional Requirements for Food and Drink in Schools', updated in 2020 and enforced by Health and Nutrition Inspectors.
Wales	All Primary	Year 7 onwards for families earning below £7,400 per year after tax	'Healthy eating in maintained schools' last updated in 2014, but currently under review.

The benefits of supporting childhood nutrition through school food

Nutrition is one of the most powerful, evidence-based tools we have to prevent ill health and reduce inequalities for all, but particularly, in our children.

With all four nations in the UK focusing on renewing and reforming our National Health Services to a prevention focused system to improve our population health, and to support the healthy weight of future generations, there has never been a more crucial time to invest in childhood nutrition. Poor nutrition in childhood leads to poorer health later in life, placing an additional burden on health and care services, which is entirely avoidable.

A 2024 study exploring the impact of universal free school meals schemes in England showed that receiving them reduced obesity prevalence by up to 11% among children aged between four and five, and up to 5% among children aged between 10-11. When shifting childhood obesity rates through policy is incredibly difficult, this is an extraordinary impact.

Less than 2% of packed lunches include the energy and nutrients children need according to school food standards. It is increasingly difficult for parents on tighter and tighter budgets and with limited capacity to diversify the packed lunch, to match the nutritional value of a school meal. It is true that the quality of school lunches can still be improved, but most of the millions of school meals served everyday across the UK, contain far more nutrition – including fresh fruit and vegetables – than an average packed lunch.

We know that poor nutrition in childhood can lead to avoidable disease and it increases the need for health interventions later in life, putting pressure on our NHS services. Groundbreaking analysis from Impact for Urban Health, evidences that for every £1 invested in introducing universal free school meals in England, £1.71 will be generated in core benefits, through increased cost savings for schools, children's increased

lifetime earnings, and crucially, through NHS savings on childhood obesity and increased savings on food costs for families. By ensuring children are properly nourished, we invest in the stability of our society for generations to come.

Children consume around one-third of their diet at school, making school meals one of the biggest nutritional interventions in the UK, and we know they work.

Childhood obesity reduced in children receiving free school meals

11% ▼

For children aged 4-5

5% ▼

For children aged 10-11

The stark reality of families experiencing food insecurity in the UK

Child poverty in the UK is increasing, 4.5 million (31%) of children live in poverty and as child poverty increases, so does food insecurity. As of January 2025, nearly one in five households with children reported that their children were experiencing food insecurity directly. This does not just relate to worrying about food, it means children and parents going without meals and portions being reduced, and when families do eat, the quality and variety of food is based on what is affordable and filling, not what is most nutritious and balanced. Yet, despite this clear need, according to the Child Poverty Action Group around 900,000 children living in poverty do not meet the eligibility criteria for free school meals.

Healthy food is simply not affordable for those on low incomes. Among the poorest fifth of the population, households with children would have to spend 70% of their disposable income on food to afford a diet in line with the Eatwell Guide, which is the government's recommended healthy diet. It is no wonder then, that so many families simply cannot afford to provide a packed lunch that meets their children's nutritional needs.

As a direct result of rising food insecurity, children in the UK are increasingly malnourished, contributing to their risk of serious illnesses - the number of NHS admissions for malnutrition amongst children up to age 17 has increased by 76% between 2007 and 2022.

Malnutrition

Malnutrition is a broad term that describes when a person's diet doesn't provide the right balance of energy or nutrients. It includes:

Undernutrition

Including wasting (low weight for height), stunting (low height for age) and underweight (low weight for age)

Micronutrient malnutrition

Lacking essential vitamins or minerals

Overweight and obesity

These forms of malnutrition can exist at the same time. For example, someone can live with obesity and still lack key nutrients – a reality often linked to food insecurity, known as the poverty–obesity paradox.

“Sometimes I am just waiting for payday and can't afford to go and buy vegetables and brown pasta and that. Those days are less stressful now because I know they're eating well at school and if they have a cheese sandwich for tea, it's not the end of the world.”

Parent

Young people themselves understand the impossibility of eating more nutritious food when there are less nutritious and cheaper options for them and their families.

“There’s two chicken shops about one minute walk from my school that sell two wings and chips for £1. A school dinner is £2.40. If it was free, people would not eat unhealthily.”

15-year-old contributor to *More Than a Meal: The Real Impact of Free School Meals Report*

As part of the evaluation of the impact of introducing universal free school meals in London, families shared that because their children were now entitled to a free nutritious lunch at school, they worry less about their child not having enough food to keep them going throughout the school day. It also found that parents were more able to spend money on healthier food at home, including being able to plan better for meals, being more efficient when shopping and buying more fruit and vegetables.



31%

(or 4.5 million) children live in poverty in the UK

900,000

children living in poverty do not meet the eligibility criteria for free school meals

76% ▲

increase in NHS admissions for malnutrition amongst children up to age 17 between 2007 and 2022



Expanding entitlement is great, but universality is key

Far too many children who are eligible for free school meals miss out due to stigma and shame, and the very practical barrier of application and enrolment. Means tested free school meals can single children out to their peers as being 'poor', reducing uptake and resulting in children not receiving the nutritious lunch to which they are entitled.

Currently in England, among households that meet the strict £7,400 free school meal entitlement threshold, it's estimated that 250,000 children aren't registered to receive their meal. Families have to face administrative complexity, language barriers, lack of clear communication and the weight of stigma that comes with asking for support, this is a failure of the system's design and not of the families.

Even with the uplift of eligibility criteria in England - entitling all children with families receiving Universal Credit to a free school meal, the full benefits of this expansion will only be seen if all entitled children are signed up to receive their free school meal. This is why the Food Foundation is calling for free school meal auto-enrolment in England, that guarantees access for children and removes the burden from local authorities, schools and parents.

One of the key questions around introducing universal as opposed to means tested school meals, is that families who can afford to pay for their child's meal, should pay. However, this logic applied to health care or education would see the means testing of the NHS and state schools. If there is a net benefit to children and society as a result of universal primary free school meals, it should not matter if children from wealthier families get fed well too.

Evidence shows that uptake by those eligible for means tested free school meals increases when the offer is universal, not just by those who are newly included, but by those who were entitled before but did not claim their meals. Making free school meals universal would eliminate the barriers of stigma, complexity and exclusion that currently prevent too many children from receiving the most impactful meal of the day.

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The wider benefits of universal free school meals to children's educational attainment

Children who are hungry have less energy and their capacity to learn and engage with their school day is limited. Evidence shows that a lack of nutrition strongly influences education outcomes, meaning that those who go without nutritious food in childhood are at a severe disadvantage, limiting their life chances and their skills and abilities later in life.

Primary teachers in England surveyed by Chefs in Schools were asked about children who were hungry at school - 88% of teachers reported pupils being excessively tired, 84% reported them being easily distracted and 74% observed disruptive behaviour.

Hunger and the anxiety of not knowing where the next meal will come from negatively impacts children's wellbeing and evidence shows that having a school meal is the option most strongly linked to better mental wellbeing.

What studies show

In Sweden, where free school meals have been universal since the 1940s, a longitudinal study showed a 3% increase in lifetime income for those who received them throughout primary school, with children from the poorest households benefiting most, suggesting that free school meals reduced socioeconomic inequalities in adulthood.

Studies from America found that expanding access to free school meals, especially to lower income households, led to higher graduation rates.

Children who receive a universal free school meal do better in school and have better earning capacity later in life.

2

Changing food culture and quality in schools



Whole School Food Approaches

To realise the far-reaching benefits of universal free school meals, schools and the wider community that support nutritious, delicious and sustainable lunches, need to create a food culture that embeds healthy food into everything they do. When children sit down together, with their friends, peers, teachers – and they know their food is prepared with care by school caterers, they create healthy food habits for life.

Whole School Food Approaches and the required culture change to implement universal free school meals can also strengthen the wider food system by creating stable demand for fresh, locally sourced produce, encouraging sustainable procurement and supporting regional farming economies. This demand helps drive investment in regenerative agriculture and shorter supply chains, aligning with national goals for environmental sustainability and resilience.

The Follow the Carrot research from Sustain found that providing universal free school meals in England has the potential to drive a 54% uplift in demand from schools for key UK-produced ingredients and represents an opportunity worth over £600 million annually in food procurement for producers and suppliers.

In schools where universal free school meals are delivered within a positive and supportive food environment, children become more open to trying new foods. In the evaluation of London's universal free school meals rollout, over half of parents (55%) said their child was trying foods

Whole School Food Approaches

These ensure that every aspect of school life supports healthy eating, food education and wellbeing. Integrating food into the school's values, teaching, policies and environment - not just into what is served at lunch, fosters a culture where good nutrition and food education are everyone's responsibility.

they wouldn't normally eat because of the policy – rising to 63% among families receiving Universal Credit. This demonstrates the powerful impact of combining universal provision with a strong whole school food culture that is shaped with, not just for, children.

Whole School Food Approaches are most effective when they are driven by strong leadership and genuine collaboration across the wider school food ecosystem including catering teams, dietitians and nutritionists, educators and those working in local food systems. When schools regularly review their progress, work in partnership across these professions and create space for pupils to shape their food culture, meaningful change can happen.

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What a typical Whole School Food Approach can look like

Providing the most nutritious school food possible

- ✓ All food that is served and brought into school, meets the nation's school food/nutrition standards, and there is a system to review packed lunches to ensure children are receiving a balanced lunch.
- ✓ Meals served are balanced, nourishing and regularly reviewed to ensure the highest quality.

A fun, social and educational dining environment

- ✓ Lunch times are calm, social and enjoyable for children, teachers and caterers.
- ✓ Spaces are clean, welcoming and promote nutritious choices.

A strong and positive food culture, where all staff from kitchen to headteachers, model healthy eating behaviour

- ✓ Staff use consistent and supportive language around food.
- ✓ There is clear accountability for food standards.
- ✓ There is a school-wide culture where food is used to support learning and wellbeing rather than as a reward.
- ✓ Catering teams receive the same opportunities for continuous professional development as other support staff and are embraced as part of the school family.

Nourishing choices all day, from water to celebrations

- ✓ Schools support a water only policy, replacing sugary drinks.
- ✓ School events celebrate with food in a way that supports wellbeing and inclusion.

Fostering positive relationships with food

- ✓ Children understand the full journey of food from source to plate, engaging in meaningful conversations about food origins and choices.
- ✓ Schools use respectful and inclusive language, adopting practices that support emotional wellbeing and mindful eating habits.

Practical food education is incorporated into the school curriculum

- ✓ Children enjoy a variety of practical food education opportunities from growing through to cooking.
- ✓ Practical food education is focused on showcasing nutritious foods to children that promote a balanced and varied diet.

Creating an equitable, inclusive and sustainable food environment

- ✓ Cultural and dietary needs are respected and met.
- ✓ Reducing food waste is paramount and environmentally conscious choices are promoted.
- ✓ Children who are entitled to free school meals are supported to claim them.
- ✓ They model waste reduction and climate-conscious practices, reinforcing the cultural shift toward sustainable diets.

The dietetic vision for quality school food

What children eat shapes how they grow, think and learn. School meals have the power to fuel curiosity, sustain attention and nurture wellbeing throughout the day providing nourishment to support both body and mind. A quality free school meal does more than fill a plate, it gives children access to diverse food every school day, in an environment where every child feels included and inspired to eat well.

England currently operates food-based standards, which specify the types of foods and drinks that must or must not be provided — for example, requiring a portion of fruit and vegetables each day or limiting deep-fried foods. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have nutrient-based and food-based standards, which set specific targets for the nutritional composition of meals, such as limits on fat, sugar and salt, and minimum levels of key nutrients like fibre, iron and calcium. While food-based standards help guide menu planning and ensure variety, nutrient-based standards go a step further by focusing on the overall nutritional quality of the meal, ensuring that what is served meets children's dietary needs more precisely.

School food guidance should be effectively monitored and enforced in each nation, so schools are supported to provide the most nutritious school meals possible. Guidance should be reviewed on a standardised timescale to ensure it meets the latest research and evidence that supports childhood nutrition, ensuring the use of minimally processed meals with plenty of fresh vegetables, fruits and pulses.

Schools need support and adequate funding to stick to these standards, with an accountability framework embedded, to ensure each child gets the lunch they deserve, one that is nutritious, balanced, meets their dietary needs, is delicious and importantly, enough to fill them up.

The role dietitians can play

Dietitians remain an under-utilised but essential resource in implementing school food standards and ensuring schools can provide the most nutritious meals possible, particularly for children with medical or restrictive diets. Their expertise spans multiple levels, from strategic planning to hands-on support, and can dramatically improve both nutritional quality and uptake of school meals.

Dietitians work directly and indirectly with school food in a variety of ways, including:

- ✓ **Collaborating with schools** to ensure safe, nutritionally balanced meals for children with special dietary needs.
- ✓ **Monitoring compliance** with school food standards and tracking uptake of free school meals.
- ✓ **Supporting catering teams** through recipe development, menu planning, and ensuring alignment with nutritional standards.
- ✓ **Assisting with marketing, communications and initiatives** that encourage healthy eating.

50 million meals

the roll out of universal free school meals in Wales

The roll out of universal primary free school meals in Wales beginning in 2022 has created the opportunity not only to provide every child with a free nutritious lunch at school, but to raise the standard of school food provision and champion inclusion at a national level.

With the pace of the roll out and dramatic increase of meals provided daily to children across Wales, a significant area of change has been the growing need for special diet provision, which has placed dietitians in a pivotal leadership role.

Here, Gwawr James, National Dietitian for Special Diets in Schools in Wales shares her experience of leading the implementation of special diet meals in schools:



Baseline Welsh Local Government Association data shows that 3.8% of primary pupils require a medically based special diet and the number is increasing. A special diet refers to any meal that cannot be chosen directly from the main menu, and generally falls into one of two categories:

- Medically prescribed diets to cater to children with specific dietary needs, for example allergies, coeliac disease, Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID), blended tube feeds
- Diets linked to protected characteristics – such as religious requirements and vegan diets

In Wales, only a small number of dietitians or nutritionists are embedded within local authorities, meaning that most special diets are managed by catering staff, who are occasionally supported by clinical dietitians from local health boards. In recognition of this, a new national dietetic role was created within the Welsh Local Government Association Food in Schools team, signalling a growing understanding that dietitians are critical to delivering safe, equitable universal meal systems.

As National Dietitian for Special Diets in Schools, I support local authorities to embed clinical nutrition expertise directly into their school meal services, ensuring that special diet provision is a well-planned, equitable system. This includes working closely with local authority catering teams, developing consistent and streamlined pathways, enabling every child in Wales to access a safe and suitable school meal and ensuring families experience inclusion rather than bureaucracy by streamlining processes to make special diet provision as straightforward and equitable as possible. The role has also involved interpreting and applying legislation, particularly the Education Act and the Equality Act, to ensure local authorities meet their statutory duties around inclusion and safety.

Throughout the year, I convene regional meetings with the local authority catering teams to collectively explore challenges, streamline systems and implement best practice, covering everything from how families request special diets to the development of policies for managing complex needs. A recent achievement was coordinating a Memorandum of Understanding between local health board dietitians and local authority catering teams

to ensure consistent carbohydrate-counted menus for children with type 1 diabetes. This is the element of the role I am most proud of; building this collaborative network that strengthens the way special diets are managed in Wales. Without this role and the opportunity to come together and share learning, children across Wales would not have their individual dietary needs met at school.

Special diet provision is no longer seen as a catering issue alone. It is increasingly recognised as part of a whole-school inclusion and safeguarding approach, where every child has the right to sit at the same table and receive a safe, nutritious meal without barriers. Collaboration is central to this approach, involving local health board dietitians, catering teams, schools, the Welsh Government and national organisations. Dietitians are helping to shape that system-level change, using food as a mechanism for equity, dignity and ill health prevention.

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3

The BDA's key asks



The BDA's key asks to realise quality universal primary free school meals across the UK

We call on policy makers, elected representatives, local authorities, schools and campaigners across the UK to move forward with our key asks:

1

Nations across the UK should commit to making free school meals universal for all children in primary school.

Governments across all four nations should commit to making free school meals a universal entitlement, not a means tested benefit. Just as education and healthcare are rights, a nutritious school meal should be a guaranteed part of the school day for every child. This would involve learning from regions in the UK where this is already a reality by adequately resourcing local authorities and in turn schools and catering teams to upgrade their infrastructure.

2

Every school should adopt a Whole School Food Approach embedding food, nutrition and sustainability into the heart of school life.

Schools should be supported to review and strengthen their food policies, engage pupils and families in shaping a positive food culture, and integrate food into the curriculum. Dietitians have a crucial role to play in guiding schools and local authorities to implement evidence-based nutrition practices.

Governments and policymakers should commit to embedding Whole School Food Approaches within education, food and health strategies, recognising them as a cornerstone of ill health prevention and environmental sustainability.

3

Free school meals must better align with current evidence-based, nutritional advice to ensure that children have the energy and quality nutrition needed to get the most from their school days now, and for the benefit of their future health.

Updated standards should also reflect cultural inclusion, environmental sustainability, and the needs of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. Dietitians are well placed to support this and must be embedded within local and national school food systems to guide implementation, provide specialist advice on medical and cultural diets, and support consistent monitoring and evaluation.

Governments in each nation should commit to a clear, transparent system of quality assurance and monitoring for school food, learning from best practice where this is already established, for example introducing a school food accountability framework to enable providers to meet school food standards by providing clear guidelines, sufficient support, and accountability measures.

What can you do to move this vision forward?

Add your voice to the call for universal primary free school meals as a public health and equality measure:



Get in touch with the BDA's campaign working group

They are directly involved with key stakeholders in free school meals and have key activities planned to support dietetic involvement in building momentum for realising free school meals: campaigns@bda.uk.com



Join other campaigns relevant to your expertise

The **No Child Left Behind** – Free school meals for all campaign is focused on England and always looking for people to take direct action.



Use our Political 101 Toolkit

Engage with your own local elected representatives in pushing for the vision for universal primary free school meals.

Keep up to date with the campaign using the QR code or via our usual channels



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Who we are

We are the British Dietetic Association (BDA), founded in 1936. We are the professional association and trade union for the whole of the dietetic profession in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We are the nation's largest organisation of food and nutrition professionals with 12,000 members.

Dietitians are highly qualified health professionals that assess, diagnose and treat diet and nutrition problems at an individual and wider public health level. They are statutorily regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), alongside other Allied Health Professions.

Using the most up to date public health and scientific research on food, health and disease, dietitians translate it into practical guidance to enable people to make appropriate lifestyle and food choices.

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