

**Expanding Free School Meals to all Primary School Pupils: Improve nutrition.
Enhance education. Ease pressure on families.**

Introduction:

Children across the UK are failing to get the nutrition they need. The cost-of-living crisis has hit too many families, leaving them struggling to provide nutritious food that their children need to thrive. 30% of children in the UK are in poverty – meaning 4.3 million are being let down. These families badly need financial pressures on them alleviated. Evidence shows that a lack of nutrition strongly influences the education attainment gap and the likelihood of adverse childhood experiences, - meaning that those who go without are at a severe disadvantage, limiting their life chances and their skills and abilities later in life. Nutrition also impacts the health of primary-age children at this crucial stage in their development. Poor nutrition at this time 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.

In Wales universal primary free school meals (UPFSM) will be available for all primary pupils by this year though rollout progress depends on local authorities. In London, City Hall (the Mayor of London's office) has made free school meals available to all primary school children as a one-off for the 2023-24 academic year. The Scottish Government aims to extend universal free school meals to P6 and P7 though this has been delayed.

Why, the value and our message:

Adequate nutrition at primary school age is essential to allow children to develop. These young ages are incredibly formative for the rest of a child's life and so their food intake place a key role in allowing them to grow, learn and thrive. Increasing child poverty – especially as living costs have grown significantly after the Covid-19 pandemic – means that now more than ever it is vital action is taken to ensure children get the food they need. In the wake of Covid-19 the educational attainment in has been struggling to recover to pre-pandemic levels, with those from worse-off background being observed attaining less. A Suvation poll for the National Education Union (2024) found that 52% of struggling parents/carers in England are cutting back on their food shop due to increasing costs. The same poll reported that almost four in ten (37%) children know someone at school who sometimes does not have enough food to eat.

A high-quality free meal at lunch time can go a long way to giving primary school pupils the nutrition they need to learn and play, reducing the burden on families and improving educational outcomes. A Department for Education (2013) pilot project found a significant improvement in attainment when universal free primary school meals were implemented with other measures aimed at improving take-up and eating habits. Numerous other studies have found clear evidence of health benefits from nutritious universal free school meals at primary age. Economic benefits have also been observed including analysis from Impact on Urban Health (2022) which found for every £1 spent

on implementing universal primary free school meals, the economy would benefit by £1.70. 78% of parents in London have reported that universal free school meals have helped to alleviate financial pressures. The National Education Union poll (2024) found that 88% of parents or carers outside of London support the expansion of UPFSM to all schools in England.

Value of universality (not means-testing): currently free school meals in most of England and Northern Ireland are means-tested, meaning that only students from whose parents or guardians receive an earned income below the threshold (£7,400 after tax in England and £14,000 in Northern Ireland) and receive income-related benefits are entitled to them. A similar threshold (£7,920) applies to pupils in P6 and P7 (ages 9-11) in Scotland but not the years below this. Means testing has a number of serious consequences including a lower uptake due to the stigma associated with being openly eligible. There are also many children who may be missed current eligibility criteria but whose families still feel the financial pressure. Making free school meals universal in primary schools would remove a stigmatised marker of difference and ensure no child misses out.

Strategy: Expand Free School Meals to ALL Primary Pupils in the UK

Make universal in England and Northern Ireland:

By expanding free school meals to cover all primary pupils in England and Northern Ireland, the UK Government and Northern Ireland Executive can ensure that every child at this crucial age will have access to a daily hot meal. Evidence from Scotland and London has shown that uptake is significantly increased by universality. Families in London have also reported a lift in financial pressures through universal access to free school meals and adoption in England could result in as much as £22 billion in annual food cost savings. This means that all struggling families, many of whom earn above the current thresholds or do not take up free school meals due to stigma, will be feel a significant financial relief.

The BDA also calls on opposition parties to include UPFSM in their policy platforms and manifestos for the upcoming general election. It is imperative to ensure that whatever the results of the election, this policy is carried through and implemented as soon as possible. This policy will directly impact a huge number of families and surveys show high levels of support for the policy. Analysis from Impact on Urban Health (2022) which found for every £1 spent on implementing universal primary free school meals, the economy would benefit by £1.70 meaning that UFSM would yield a significant economic return. This makes the policy a smart commitment, providing relief to families and benefits to health and education while also being financially prudent.

Encourage full roll out in Scotland and Wales:

The BDA encourages the Scottish Government to extend universal free school meals to years P6 and P7, completing roll out and ensuring 9–11-year-olds are able to benefit as soon as possible. Scotland's universal free school meals policy has already proved a

success from Nursey to P5. Uptake has measurably increased among the worst-off pupils in these years and there is evidence of improved classroom performance. Covering years P6 and P7 would ensure all primary school pupils in Scotland are covered by universal free school meals giving these older pupils a head start before beginning secondary school.

The BDA encourages the Welsh Government and Welsh local authorities to take action to ensure this is successfully completed across all primary schools as soon as possible, meeting the 2024 target.

UK-Wide:

Ensuring that free school meals deliver nutrition to primary children is a crucial element in making sure the aims of the policy are delivered to the fullest extent. The BDA wants the UK and devolved Governments to ensure that free school meals provided to primary school children are healthy and nutritious. These meals should be hot and contain a balance of nutrients needed by children to get them through a school day and help them to grow. Highly processed foods should be avoided and local procurement prioritised.

Tactics:

- **Commit to the Principle of UPFSM and include the policy in manifesto for the upcoming UK election:**

To ensure that UPFSM are implemented as soon as possible, it is imperative that political parties consider the policy in the lead up to the upcoming general election. As each party puts together its policy platform as part of its pitch to the electorate, we urge them to look carefully at UPFSM and include the policy in their manifestos. This will make it clear to the electorate that parties are committed to taking action to relieve financial pressures on families and improve the wellbeing and future prospects of children. A clear commitment at this stage will also mean that UPFSM will feature as a core element of the programme for the government which takes office after the election. This will in turn mean it is likely to be implemented sooner and not delayed or cancelled.

- **Allocate central government funding for every primary school child to have FSM:**

While UPFSM is a relatively inexpensive measure, the UK Government will need to allocate funding so that schools are able to provide free meals. In the first budget after the election, the elected UK Government should allocate hypothecated funding as part of the Education budget. This should cover the expected expenses of the programme for the first financial year and hypothecate the funding needed for subsequent years. The funding should ensure all aspects of the programmes are considered including funding UPFSM in schools funded by the government but not directly administered by local authorities.

Following this Budget allocation, the Northern Ireland Executive should allocate consequential funding for a similar UPFSM programme in Northern Ireland.

- **Lay the necessary legislation and publish implementation strategy for UPFSM to be rolled out across all publicly funded primary schools, consulting on both:**

UPFSM will likely require secondary legislation and a strategy to be implemented. We urge political parties to seek advice on what legislation would be required and carry out preparatory work on this so it may be laid quickly after the next election. We also urge the government in office after the election to publish an implementation strategy for the roll out of UPFSM including a timeline indicating when different stages of roll-out will occur and what actions will need to take place. This will help stakeholders to better understand their role in the policy and allow them to prepare for when they need to take action. The Northern Ireland Executive should also take advice on what legislation they would need to implement a UPFSM programme and publish an equivalent roll-out strategy. Legislation and the implementation strategy should be consulted on to ensure stakeholders' view are taken into account and the resultant programme is of the highest quality.

- **Roll out UPFSM efficiently and review ways to further the effectiveness of the policy:**

The UK Government in office after the general election, once funding, legislation and a strategy for implementation is in place, should ensure the roll out takes place quickly and efficiently. The quality of the implementation strategy will be important to ensure this takes place and this should be amended in line with stakeholder views and adhered to wherever possible. Periodic reviews of the roll out should take place with updates to the strategy when necessary. The impact of the policy should also be assessed during the roll out period so that by the time it is fully implemented, the programme can be at its most effective. Other policies to complement and develop on UPFSM should be researched and trailed during the roll out period and considered for when the programme is fully implemented.

When:

The [BDA 2024-2034 strategic plan](#) highlights two timeframes: 2027 and 2034. These pertain to short term work and a vision for the longer term. The free school meals

campaign is mentioned in relation to the 2027 timeframe. However, due to the relatively simple aims of the FSM campaign, the immediate term presents fantastic opportunities due to the upcoming general election likely to take place at the end of this year. Therefore, we believe that in the pre-election period parties should commit to implementing the policy of UPFSM in the next parliament. We believe that laying legislation and delineating funding for UPFSM should be a priority in the next parliament and the new government should start the roll out as soon as possible. We believe the Northern Ireland Executive should use consequential funding from this to implement UPFSM at the same time. We believe that roll out should be complete by 2027. In the longer term, we would wish the UK Government to review the nutritional value free school meals, assess the impact of the policy and explore way it could be furthered (for example providing vouchers over school holidays or extending to some secondary school years). The Welsh and Scottish Governments should continue to support full roll out with the latter delivering on its commitment to provide UPFSM to P6 and P7 by the 2026 devolved election.

Conclusion:

With the cost of living hurting the prospects of so many children and families across the UK under high levels of financial pressure, providing all primary pupils with a free daily nutritious meal will make a huge difference. We believed that following these tactics and strategies is the best way to ensure that this prospect is made into a reality in every part of the country. Evidence cited has shown that this policy has a wide array of benefits from educational attainment, to improving public health, lower pressures on families and produce a return for the economy. With momentum behind this policy and a general election imminent, the time to act - and secure a better future for children and - families is now.

REFERENCES:

Department for Education (2013) 'Free School Meals Pilot: Impact Report'. [Pilot Study] ([Report Title \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#))

Impact on Urban Health (2022) 'Investing in Children's Future: A Cost Benefit Analysis of Free School Meal Provision Expansion'. [Research] ([FSM-Executive-Summary.pdf \(urbanhealth.org.uk\)](#))

Survation (2024) 'Poll of 1,522 parents aged 18+ with primary school aged children and 1,547 primary school children living in England on behalf of the National Education Union'. [Survey] (<https://www.survation.com/https-www-survation-com-archive-2024-2/>)

By Fergus Turtle (Wales Policy and Campaigns Officer)