ParentPayGroup

Chapter one

Parental engagement report 2026

Meal engagement & free school meals under the microscope



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Contents

Welcome to the first instalment of our 2026 Parent Research series 3

Your ticket to better connected school catering operations 4

Proud to partner with The School Food People 5

School meals: who's eating them and what do parents really think? 6

Examining daily school meal uptake 8

What's informing decisions around school meals? 12

Understanding parents' perceptions of quality 16

Where are parents getting their information from? 20

Price point. Uncovered. 22

Free school meals – a snapshot. 26

Free school meals eligibility. Uncovered. 28

Primary schools vs. secondary schools 30

The national breakdown 32

Daily consumption of free school meals 34

Barriers to daily uptake 36

Are free school meals helping families? 38

Exploring parents' ratings and perceived quality of life impact 40

Spotlight on breakfast clubs 42

Appetite for breakfast club provision 44

The big draw for parents 46

Welcome to the first instalment of our 2026 Parent Research series

Improving school meal uptake starts with understanding why parents and children make the choices they do.

Trusted by over 4 million parents, we're uniquely placed to ask the big questions school caterers need answered and find out what parents really think about key aspects of school meal provision.

Partnering once again with The School Food People, we surveyed 71,354 parents to provide meaningful insight into what's shaping their views and behaviours.

This report is the first in our 2026 Parent Research series, focusing on meal engagement and free school meals.

The findings offer an unfiltered view of school meal provision through the eyes of the parents who experience it first hand — a powerful tool for caterers ready to turn insight into action.

Read on to discover how often children eat school meals, what motivates their choices, how parents perceive the food and track what their child eats, and how closely bookings match what's actually eaten.

We also explore free school meal eligibility by school phase and region, why some children skip their FSM, the benefits FSMs offer families and how this connects to food ratings, and the role of breakfast clubs.

Parent demographics and disclaimers

Your ticket to better connected school catering operations

We're ParentPay Group and we're on a mission to help school caterers supercharge operations, with joined-up solutions that help teams improve efficiency, strengthen control, and make more informed decisions throughout the school meals journey.

That's because when school catering management is connected, teams are empowered to:

- Ensure every child is served a healthy and nutritious meal
- Boost meal uptake
- Improve accuracy and forecasting to lower food waste and maintain financial stability
- Build stronger partnerships with schools and parents
- Simplify allergen safety and compliance

We're here to help you join up the dots, with connected technology that optimises multiple steps of the school meals journey — from meal planning and booking, through to kitchen operations, meal service, payments, and reporting.

Kitchen Management | Meal Management | Cashless POS | Payments

Powered by

ParentPay Cypad BlueRunner



Proud to partner with The School Food People

We're proud to work in partnership with The School Food People.

As the leading representative body for school catering professionals across England and Wales, The School Food People exists to give everyone working in education catering a voice — along with the knowledge, resources and support to make nutritious, high-quality food part of everyday school life.

They do this by:

- Advocating for better school meal funding
- Representing the sector to government
- Connecting members through events and networking
- Celebrating excellence in school food delivery

At ParentPay Group, we're committed to supporting school catering teams and the communities they serve and our partnership with The School Food People is a reflection of that commitment.

Together, we're helping school caterers navigate the changing demands of the sector, working towards a future where every child has access to great school food, every day.

School meals: who's eating them and what do parents really think?

School caterers work hard every day to ensure their food offer ticks all the right boxes – from nutrition and safety to quality and affordability and everything in between.

But how are children engaging with school meals and what do parents think?

To find out, we asked a series of questions to discover how often children are eating school meals, why they do or don't eat them, what parents think of the food, how parents keep track of what their child eats, how reliably bookings match what is actually eaten, and the all-important price point.

Read on to discover more.

View the full report



Examining daily school meal uptake

To kick things off we asked how often children have a school meal.

Among parents who answered, 56% said their child has a school meal every day and 70% have one at least three or four days a week. Only one in ten children never have a school meal, and a further one in five have one no more than a couple of days a week (see figure 1).

Whether a child has a school meal every day is associated more with whether the meal is free, rather than with where the child goes to school. Among children on means-tested free school meals (FSMs), 80% have one every day, and among children on universal FSMs, 76% do. This compares with 45% of children whose family is not eligible for FSMs (see figure 3).

The difference between primary and secondary school families is small by comparison, with 57% vs. 54% (see figure 2), suggesting that age matters far less than whether the meal is free.

The breakdowns by country and home language can be found in the main report appendix.

56%

of children have a school meal every day

70%

have a school meal at least three or four days a week

1 in 10

have never had a school meal

How often children have a school meal

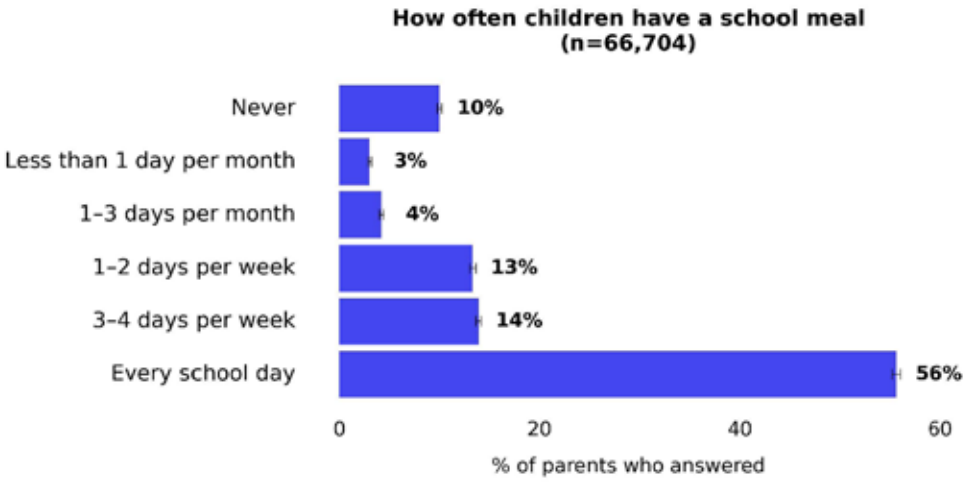


figure 1. How often children have a school meal (Q6; see appendix for question wording).
Base: parents who answered. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

How often children have a school meal, primary versus secondary school

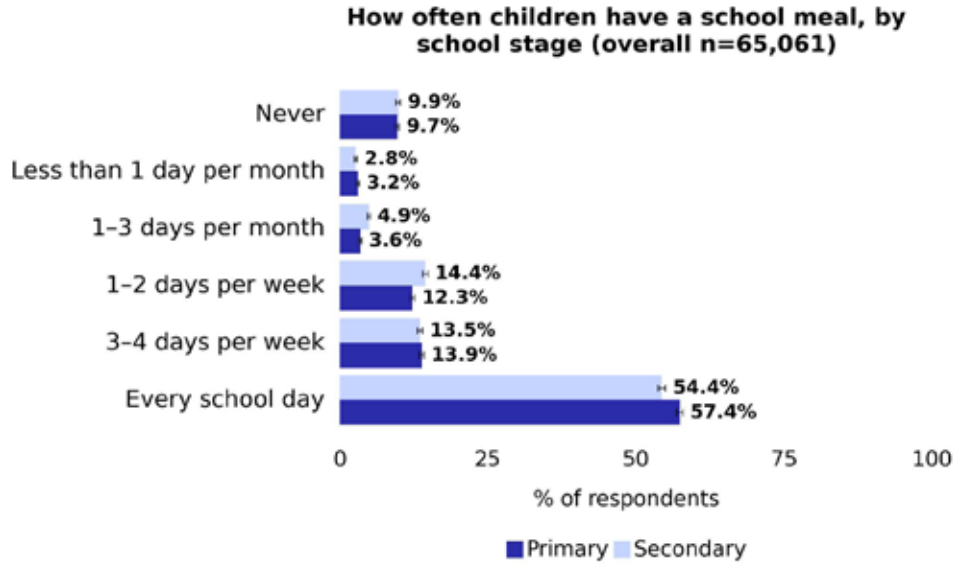


figure 2. How often children have a school meal, primary versus secondary school (Q6; see appendix for question wording).
Error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

Examining daily school meal uptake

These findings are shown clearly when modelling the factors most strongly associated with daily eating.

Children on means-tested FSMs are about five times as likely to eat one every day compared with non-eligible children, and those on universal FSMs are about four and a half times as likely as non-eligible children.

The meal-quality rating is the next strongest factor, with 19%. Factors including where the family lives, school stage, and home language make little difference (see figure 4; full detail is in the main report appendix).



Among children who receive a school meal, how often they eat one, by free-school-meal entitlement

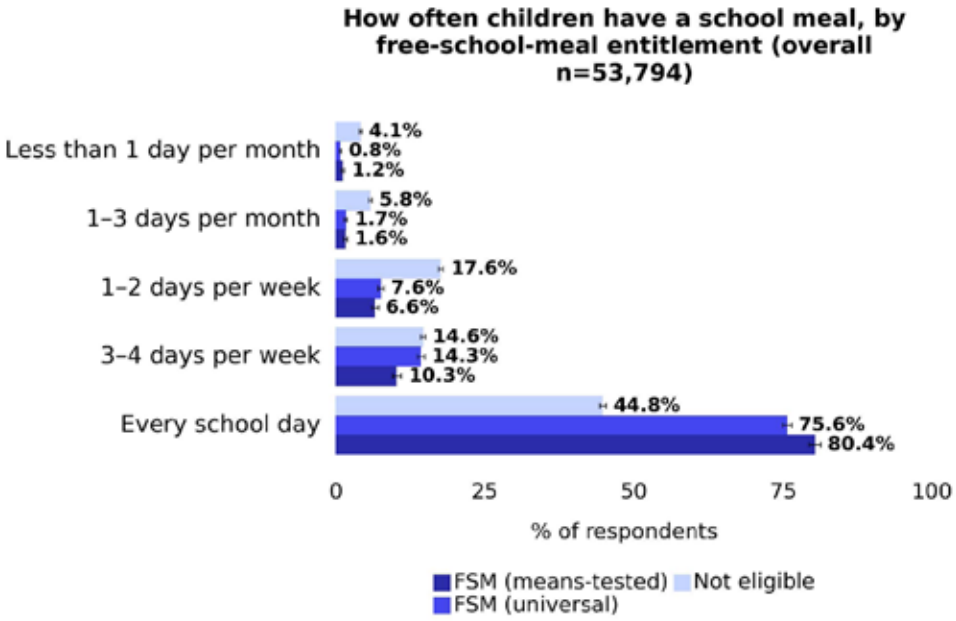


figure 3. Among children who receive a school meal, how often they eat one, by free-school-meal entitlement (means-tested versus universal versus not eligible) (Q6, Q12 and Q13; see main report appendix for question wording). The two free-school-meal groups count only children who currently take up a free meal, so the chart shows how often they eat one rather than whether they do; the 'never' option is not shown. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

What most sets apart children who eat a school meal every day

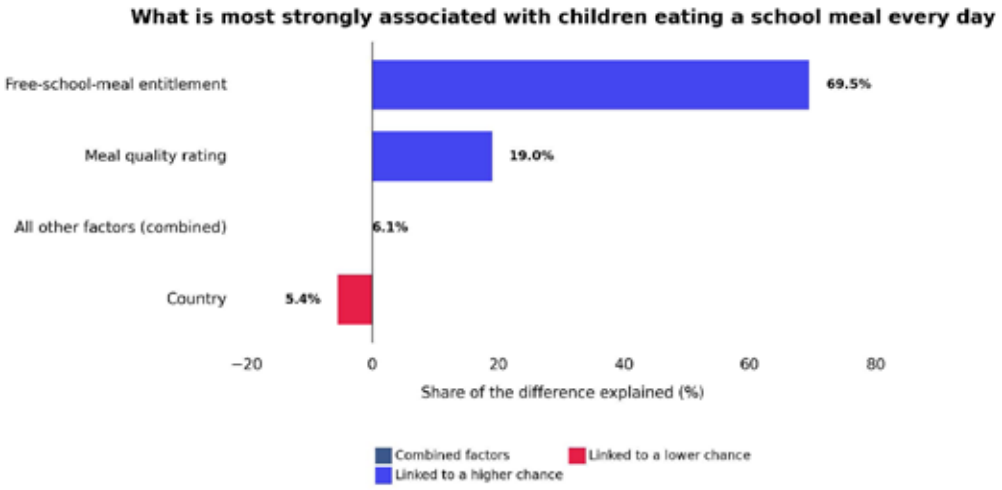


figure 4. What most sets apart children who eat a school meal every day (Q6, Q12 and Q13; see appendix for question wording). Bar length shows how much each factor adds to the difference between children; free-school-meal entitlement carries most of it, with meal-quality rating next. Smaller factors are combined; the full breakdown, including the school-stage direction, is in the appendix.

What's informing decisions around school meals?

Next, we wanted to know what motivates a parent to choose a school meal for their child, so we asked them what strongly influences their decision.

Convenience topped the list with 57%, followed by the child wanting a school meal (49%). Nutrition, saving money, and friends having school meals rate lower on parents' reported reasons for selecting a school meal (see figure 5). Our findings also uncovered that everyday practicalities, and the child's own preference, do more to shape the choice than the meal's nutritional value.

When children skip a school meal, the data suggests the food itself is often the sticking point. The most common reason parents give is that their child doesn't always enjoy what's on offer (43%), while 17% feel the quality could be improved.



What strongly influences parents to choose a school meal

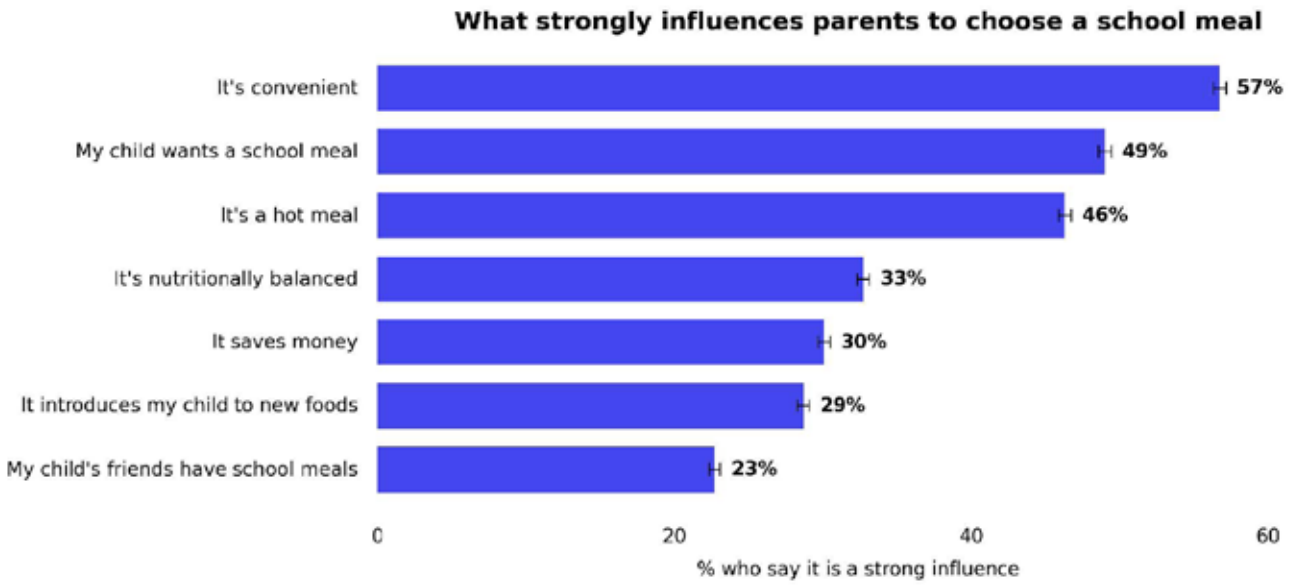


figure 5. What strongly influences parents to choose a school meal (Q9; see appendix for question wording). Share rating each a strong influence; each item is shown on the parents who rated it (n ranges from 50,000 to 52,900). Base: parents whose child has school meals. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

57%

of parents choose a school meal for their child because of the convenience

49%

of parents choose a school meal because their child wants it

What's informing decisions around school meals?

Our data shows that habit and convenience also matter, with a third preferring packed lunches.

Cost remains a real barrier for some families, with 29% saying school meals are too expensive (see figure 6). Booking issues were the least endorsed reasons for not having a school meal, with 1-2% of parents citing this reason (see figure 6).

Interestingly, 21% of parents reported that their child (just over one in five children) does not have enough time to eat a school meal (figure 6) – something that cashless POS technology can help address by minimising canteen queues.

Quality and child preference drive uptake but so can better visibility. Proactive parent engagement around menus, nutritional value, and what children are enjoying at lunchtime can help shift the dial away from packed lunches.

29%

of parents say that school meals are too expensive

21%

of parents say their child doesn't have enough time to eat a school meal



Why children do not have a school meal

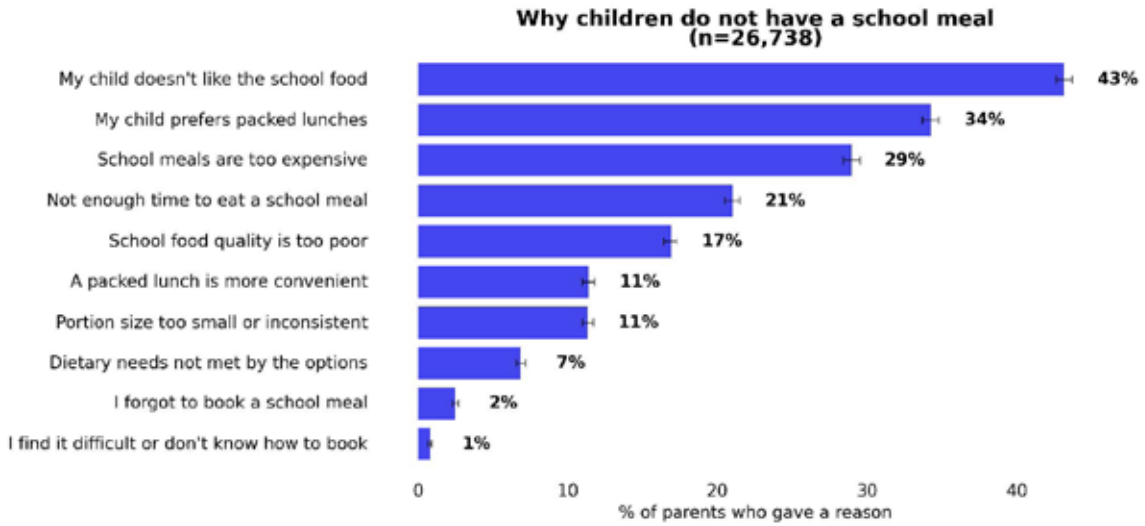


figure 6. Why children do not have a school meal (Q8, select-all; see appendix for question wording). Base: parents who gave a reason.

Why children do not have a school meal, children who never eat one versus those who eat one occasionally

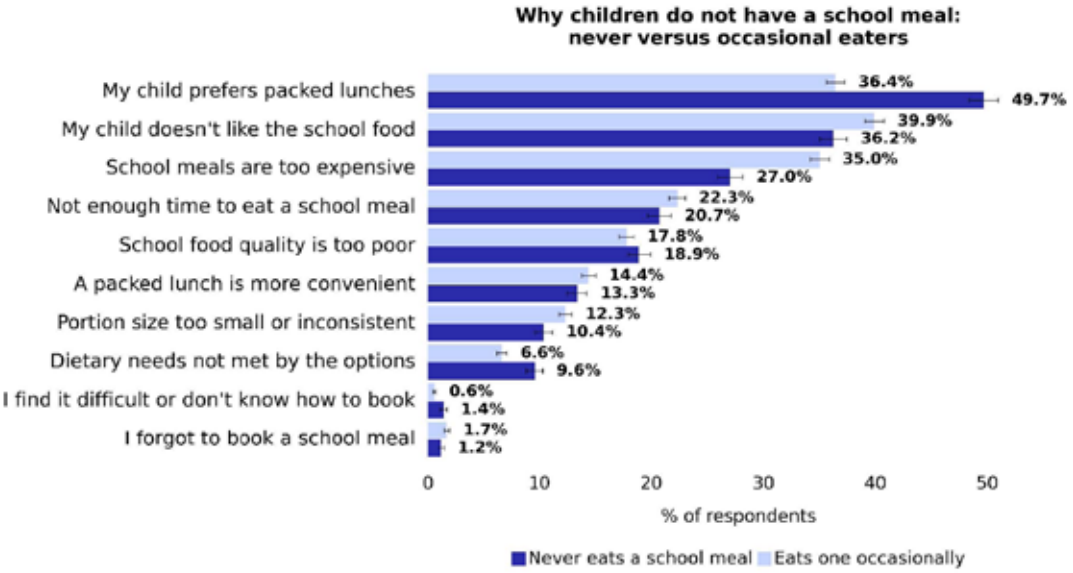


figure 6b. Why children do not have a school meal, children who never eat one versus those who eat one occasionally (Q8, select-all; see appendix for question wording). Occasional eaters are those who have a school meal no more than a couple of days a week. Base: parents who gave a reason (never n=5,860; occasional n=12,832). Error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

Understanding parents' perceptions of quality

Our research confirms that parents are broadly positive about school meals.

Just over half are satisfied with the meals their child's school offers (52% satisfied or very satisfied), but only 15% are very satisfied.

However, a large neutral middle of around a third, and more than one in ten who are dissatisfied, leaves clear room for improvement (see figure 7).

Quality ratings follow a similar pattern. Our data shows that half of parents rate school meals as good or excellent (50%), four in ten rate them as average, and one in ten rate them as poor.

Satisfaction and quality move together, and both are higher among families who receive FSMs, compared with families who pay: 60% of FSM families are satisfied compared with 48% of paying families, and 58% rate the quality good or excellent compared with 46%.

Quality ratings are otherwise similar across England, Scotland, and Wales (see figure 8, along with the main report appendix for the breakdowns by school stage and country).



How satisfied parents are with school meals

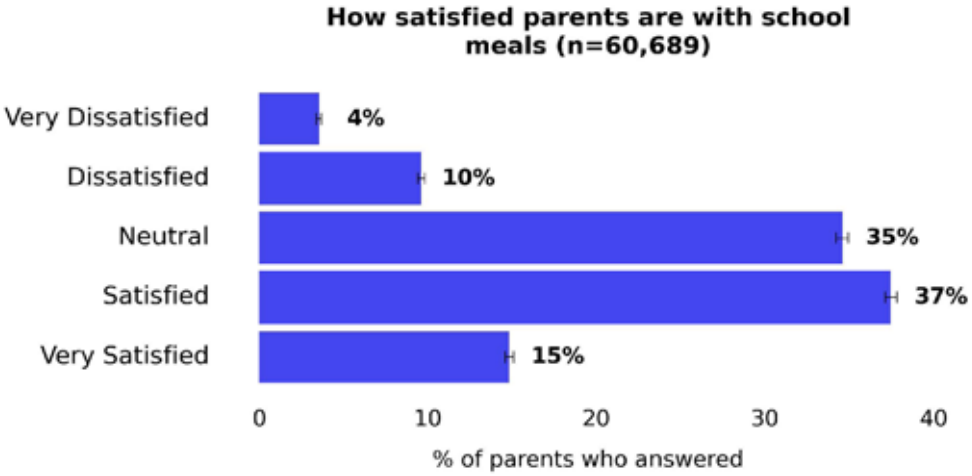


figure 7. How satisfied parents are with school meals (Q11; see appendix for question wording). Base: parents who answered. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

How parents rate the quality of school meals

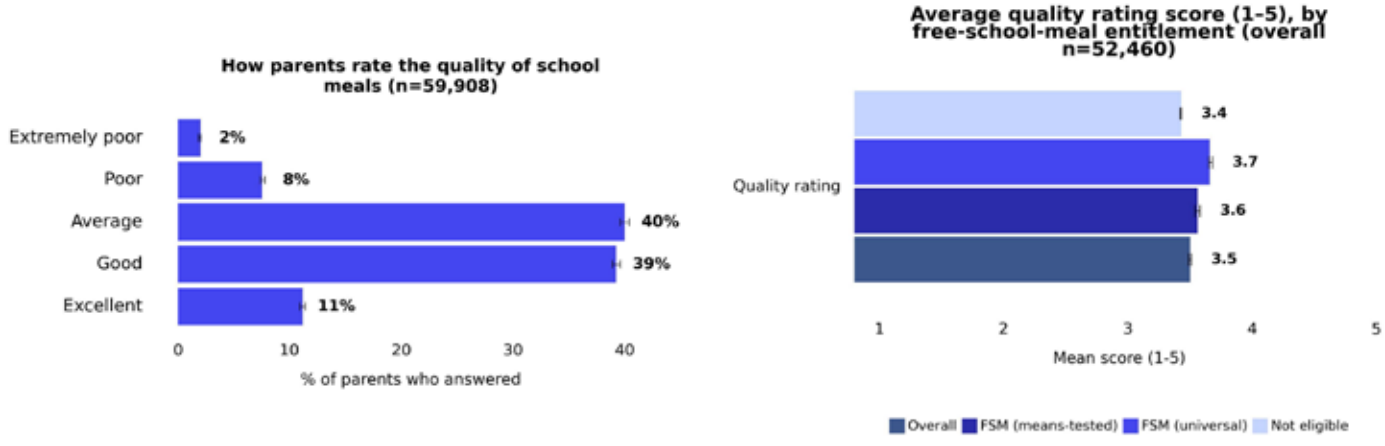


figure 8. Left; How parents rate the quality of school meals (Q19; see appendix for question wording). Base: parents who answered. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals. Right; Average quality score (1–5), by free-school-meal entitlement (Q19, Q12 and Q13; see appendix for question wording).

Understanding parents' perceptions of quality

So, what do parents believe makes a good-quality school meal?

According to our data, parents point first to taste and nutrition, each chosen by around two-thirds of respondents, with freshness following close behind. In contrast, variety and portion sizes are named far less often, each by about a third (see figure 9).

With only a minority of parents very satisfied and a large neutral middle to win over, the biggest gains could come from doubling down on taste, nutrition, and freshness — the three things parents say define a quality school meal.



How satisfied parents are with school meals

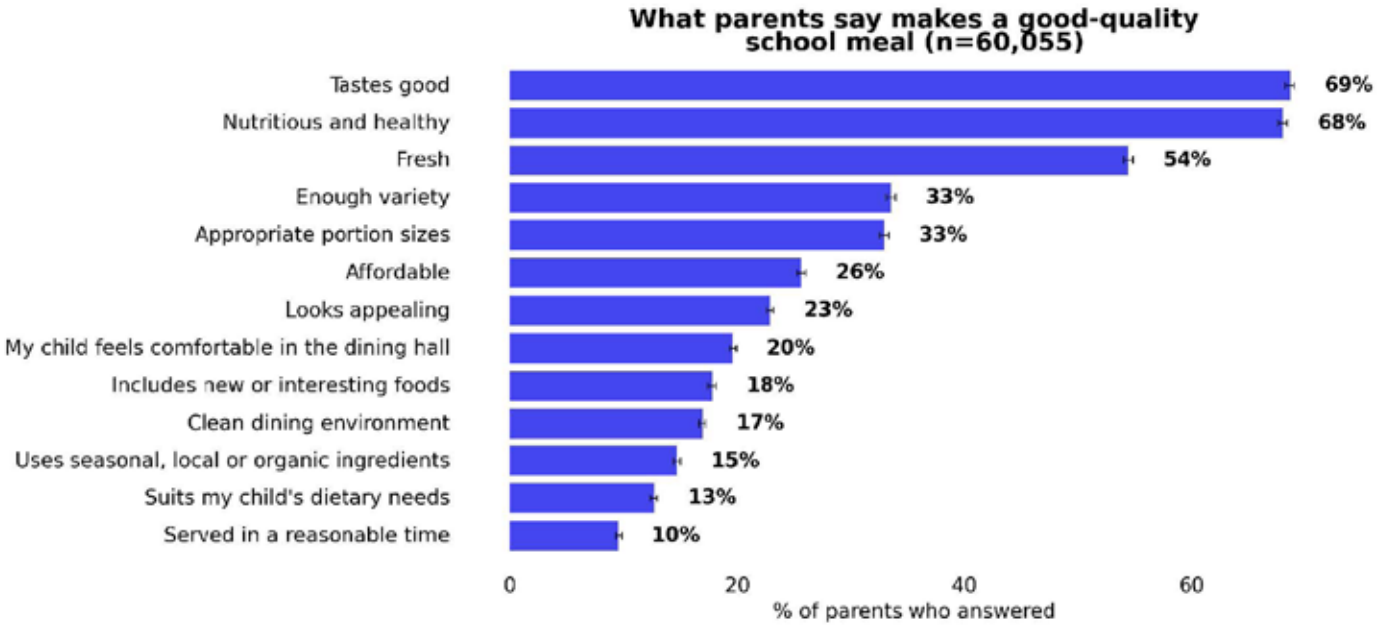


figure 9. How parents define a good-quality school meal (Q20, select up to five; see appendix for question wording).
Base: parents who answered.

52%
of parents are satisfied with the meals their child's school offers

A third
are neutral about the meals their child's school offers

1 in 10
are dissatisfied with the meals their child's school offers

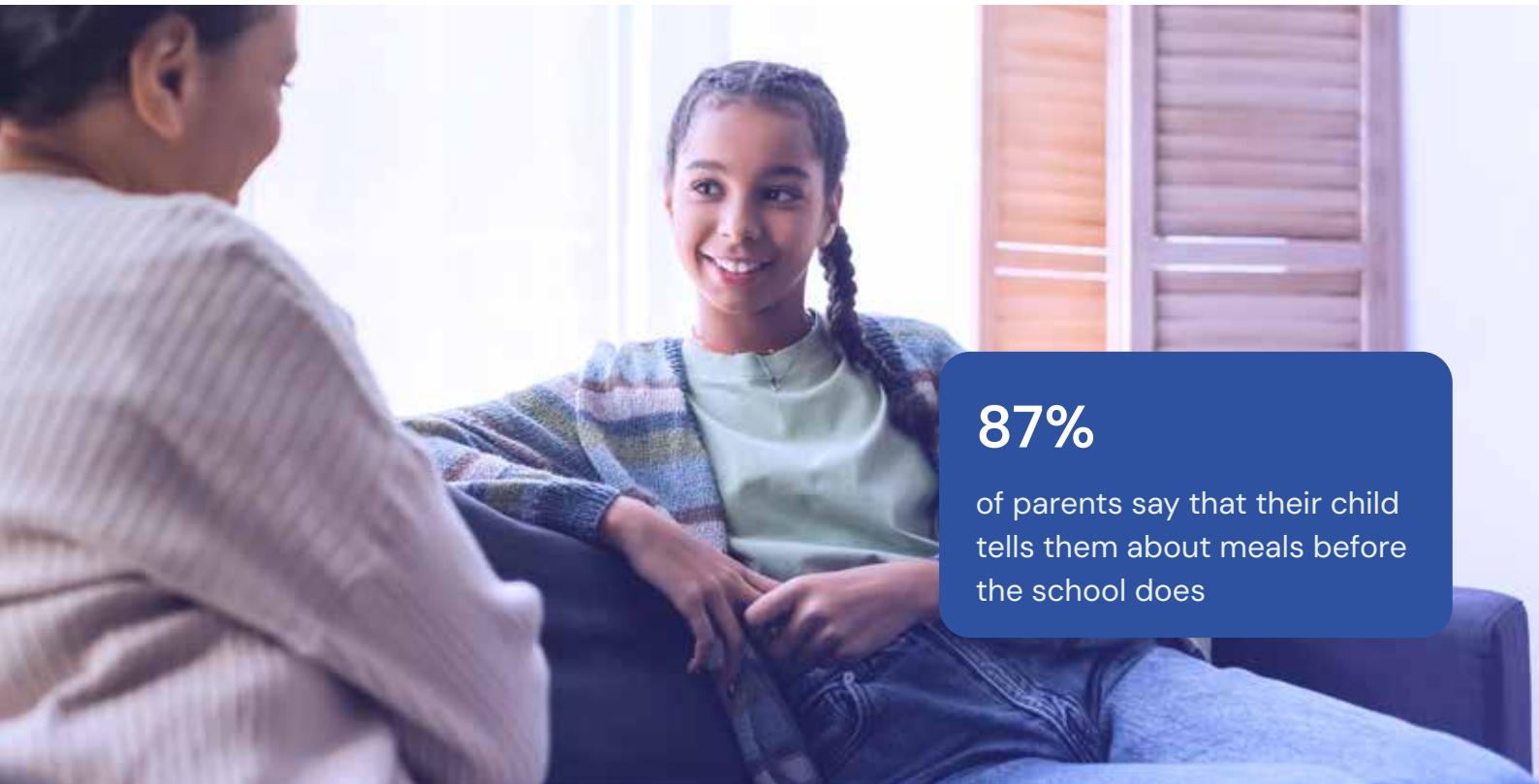
Where are parents getting their information from?

Our findings have uncovered satisfaction levels and parents' perception of quality, but what's informing their thinking? To answer this, we asked how parents find out about school meals.

Most parents keep track of what their child eats at school, but they find out almost entirely from their child. In fact, 87% report that their child tells them, far ahead of the school's own menu or description (22%) or having seen or tasted the meals themselves (11%) (see figure 10).

Just over half said the school gives them the right amount of information about meals (56%), but four in ten say it's too little (42%). And the gap widens with the child's age. At secondary school, half of parents say they get too little, compared with around a third at primary school (see main report appendix). Barely any parents feel they get too much information (under 2%) (see figure 11).

Parents are forming opinions about school meal quality almost entirely based on what their child tells them. With many parents saying they receive too little information, there's a clear appetite for more direct parental engagement that bridges the gap. Increasing targeted communication offers school caterers more control over the narrative – helping to boost both perceptions and uptake.



87%

of parents say that their child tells them about meals before the school does

How parents find out about school meals

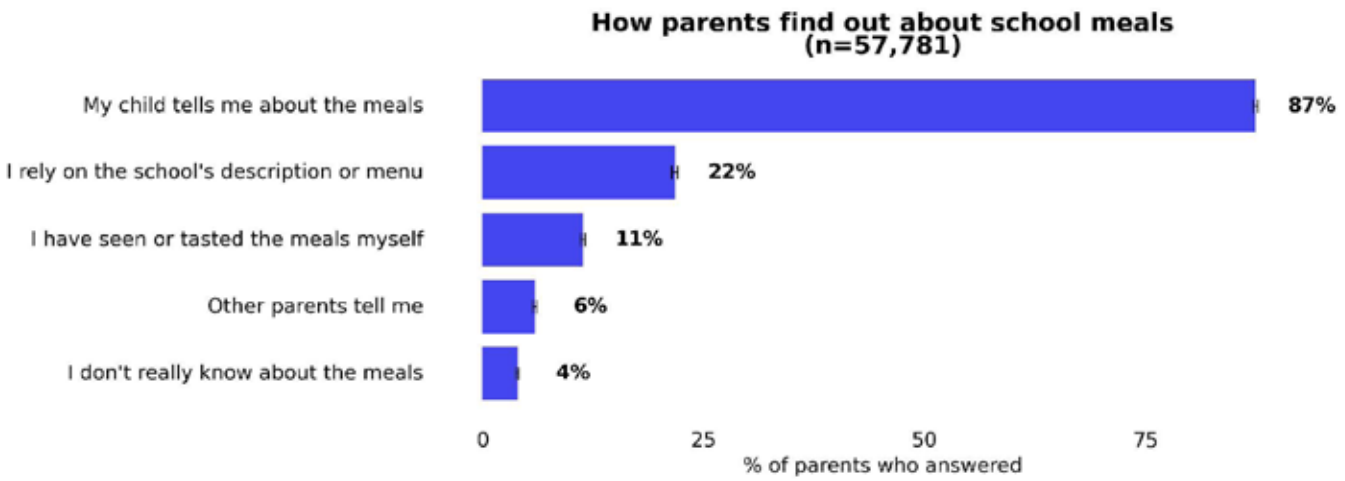


figure 10. How parents find out about school meals (Q22, select-all; see appendix for question wording). Base: parents who answered.

How much information parents say they get about school meals

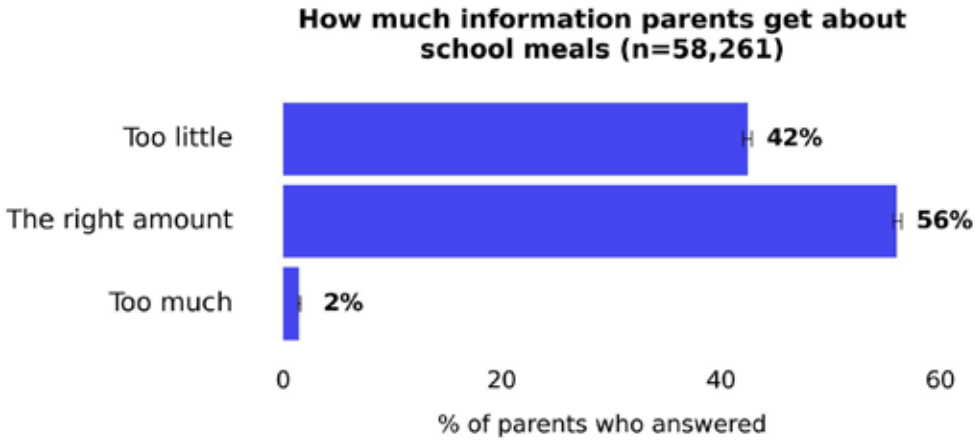


figure 11. How much information parents say they get about school meals (Q42; see appendix for question wording).
Base: parents who answered. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

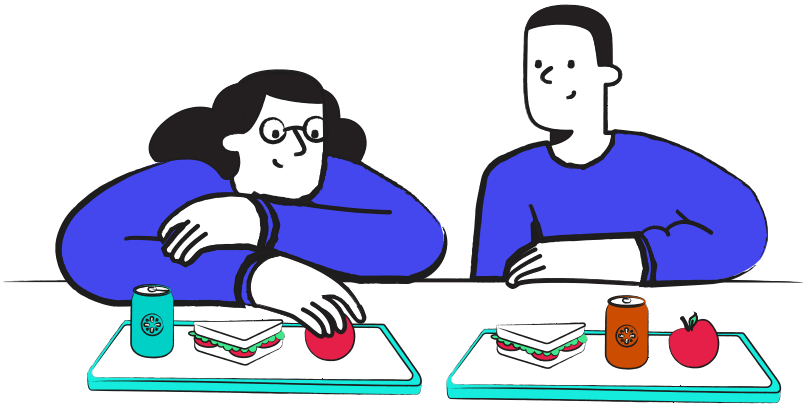
Price point. Uncovered.

With the cost-of-living crisis continuing to bite, we wanted to know what parents think is the cheaper option: school meals or packed lunches.

Among parents who pay for meals, more than half think a packed lunch is the cheaper option (54%), three in ten think the two cost about the same (29%), and only 17% think a school meal is cheaper (see figure 12).

When asked directly how they feel about the price, just under half of parents who pay for school meals told us they are fairly priced (46%), compared with around a third who said they are too expensive (35%) (see figure 13).

How parents who pay for school meals feel about the price differs by nation, even though they rate the food itself similarly. In Scotland just one in five call school meals too expensive (21%), compared with around a third in England and Wales (36% in each) (see figure 13).



Half of parents

paying for a school meal think a packed lunch is the cheaper option

3 in 10

think the cost of a packed lunch and a school meal is the same

Which parents think is cheaper, a packed lunch or a school meal

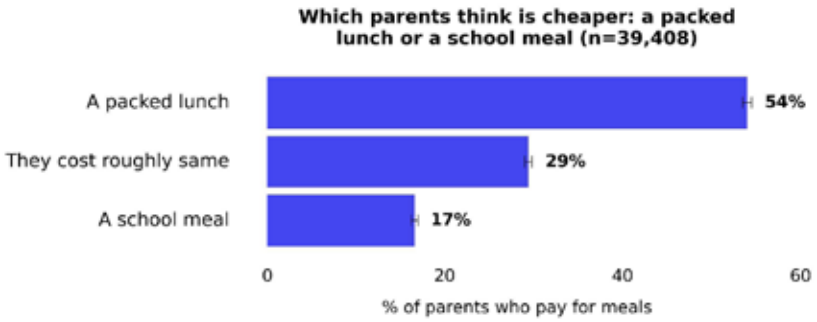


figure 12. Which parents think is cheaper, a packed lunch or a school meal (Q33; see appendix for question wording).
Base: parents who pay for meals. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

How parents feel about the price of school meals

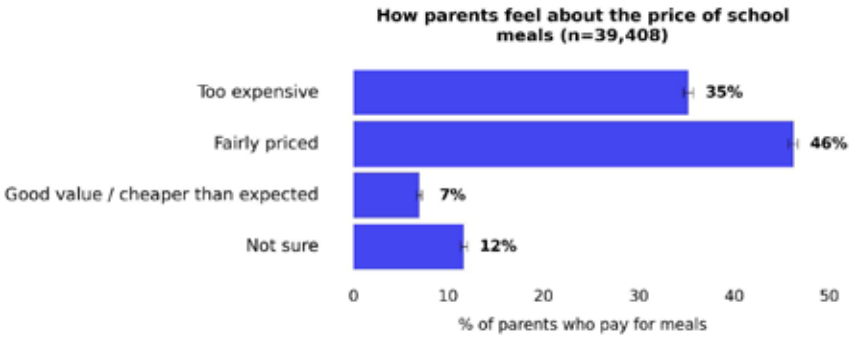


figure 13. How parents feel about the price of school meals (Q34; see appendix for question wording).
Base: parents who pay for meals. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

How parents feel about the price of school meals, by country

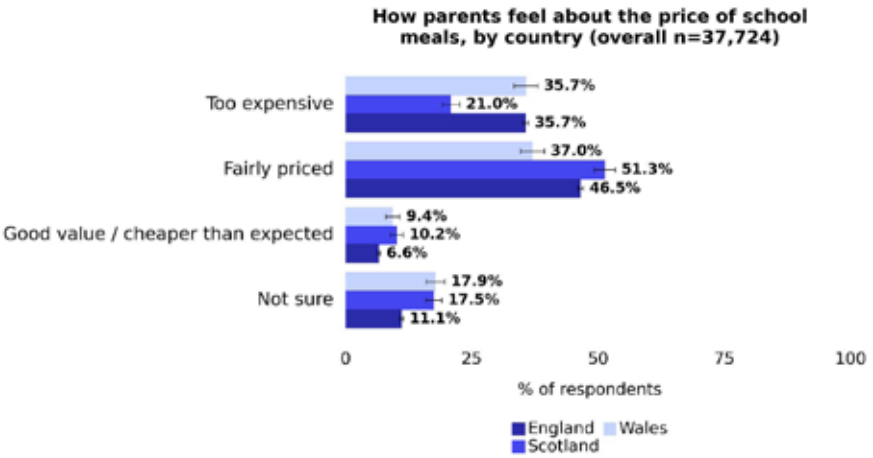


figure 13. How parents feel about the price of school meals, by country (Q34, Q01; see appendix for question wording).
Base: parents who pay for meals. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

Price point. Uncovered.

Our data also reveals a correlation between price perception and how parents rate the food quality (see figure 14).

Among parents who rate quality good or excellent, only a quarter call meals too expensive (24%) and two-thirds see them as fairly priced or good value. In contrast, among parents who rate quality poorly, more than half call them too expensive (55%). Parents who rate the food highly are less likely to call the price too high (see figure 15).

The same cost-sensitive group shows up in the cheaper-lunch question, where more than half of the parents who think a packed lunch is cheaper also call meals too expensive (54%), against one in six of those who think the two cost about the same. Secondary school parents are more cost-sensitive than primary school parents on both counts. The full breakdowns by country, school stage, and cheaper-lunch belief can be found in the main report appendix.

For school caterers, price sensitivity and quality perception move together: parents who think the food is good rarely think it's too expensive. This suggests the priority isn't about justifying the price but demonstrating the quality of school meals.



How parents feel about the price, by how they rate meal quality

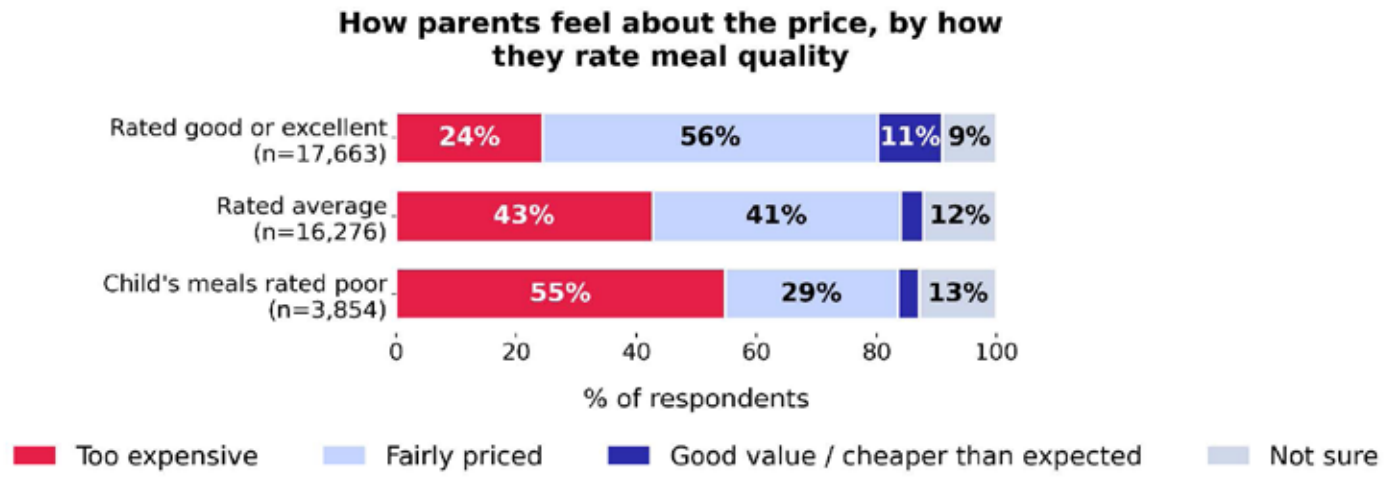


figure 14. How parents feel about the price, by how they rate meal quality (Q34, Q19; see appendix for question wording).
Base: parents who pay for meals and rated quality. Labels omitted for segments under 6%.

How parents feel about the price, by which option they think is cheaper

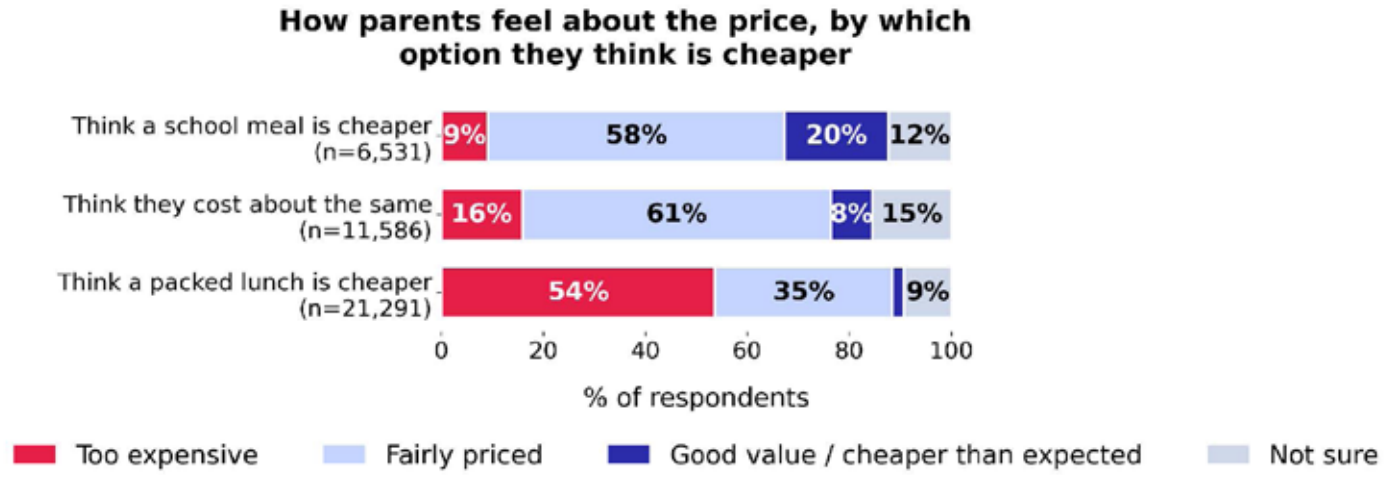


figure 15. How parents feel about the price, by which option they think is cheaper (Q34, Q33; see appendix for question wording).
Base: parents who pay for meals. Labels omitted for segments under 6%.

Free school meals – a snapshot.

Free school meals (FSMs) provide a lifeline for many families, helping pupils from less affluent backgrounds access hot, nutritious school meals.

The benefits are clear, with research linking the programme to attainment gains, stronger adherence to nutritional standards, and reduced childhood obesity.

With eligibility rising, demand climbing, and funding struggling to keep pace with soaring food prices, school caterers face growing pressure to deliver more meals, without compromising quality.

This section unpacks the real picture, as told by parents: eligibility by school phase and region, why some children skip their meal, the perceived benefits FSMs offer families (and how this intersects with food ratings), and the role of breakfast clubs.

Read on to discover more.

View the full report

- Free school meals



Free school meals eligibility. Uncovered.

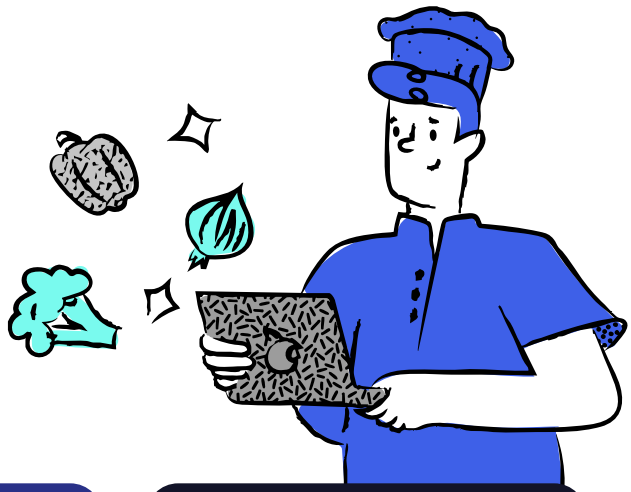
To understand eligibility, we asked parents about their child's FSM status.

A third (33%) of parents who answered said their child currently gets FSMs and over half (56%) said their child is not eligible.

The remaining 11% fall into a middle group, including families who are unsure whether their child qualifies, those who are eligible but not currently receiving meals, or those who expect to become eligible soon (see figure 1).

Within this group, uncertainty is a key factor. Almost half (49%) said they're unsure whether their child qualifies (see figure 2). This highlights a gap in awareness that upcoming policy changes may need to address.

It also presents an opportunity for school caterers to convert uncertainty into uptake, through clear messaging at enrolment and via enhanced parental engagement practices.



33%
of parents say their child gets free school meals

11%
either don't know or are unsure if their child qualifies

56%
say their child is not eligible for free school meals

Free-school-meal status, split by primary and secondary school

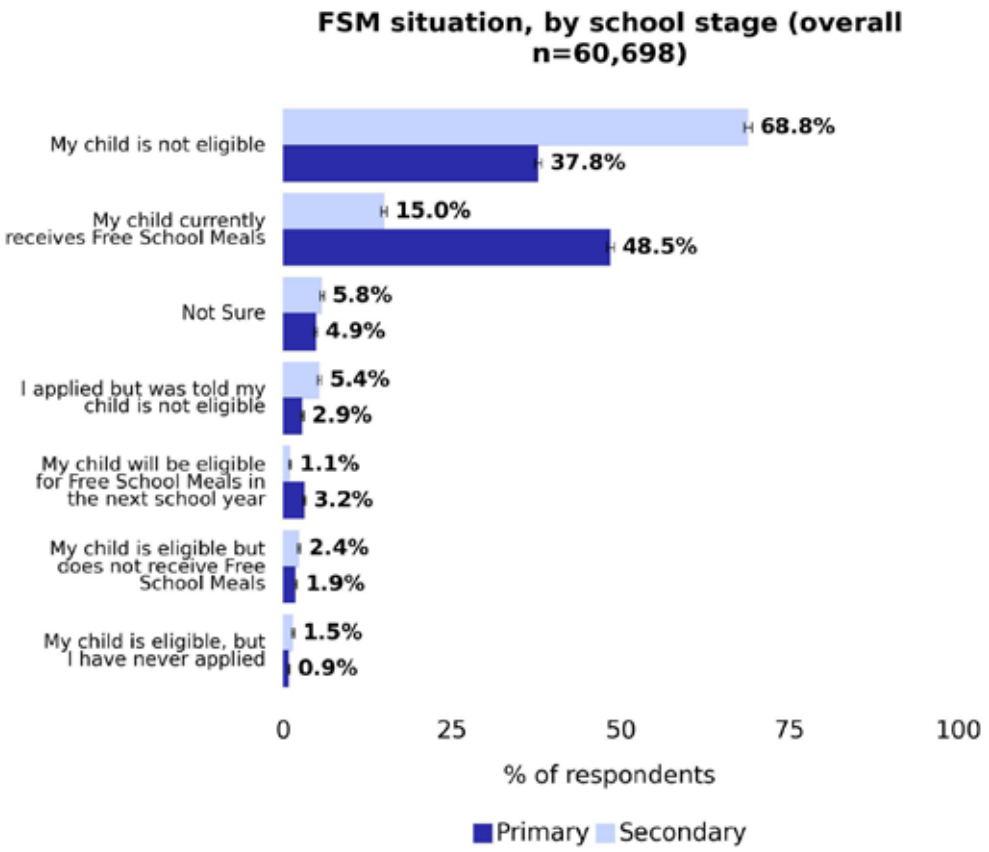


figure 1. Free-school-meal status, split by primary and secondary school (based on Q12). 95% confidence intervals shown.

Make-up of the 'other status' group

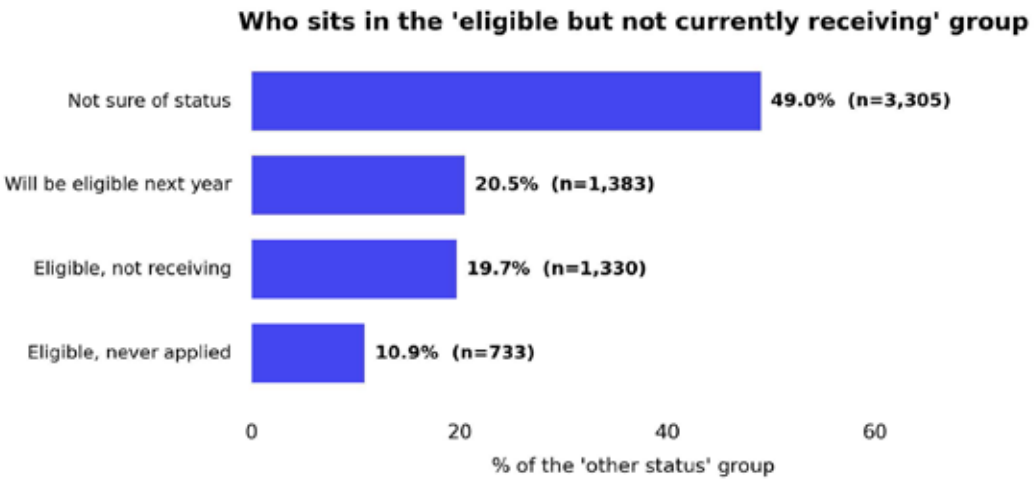


figure 2. Make-up of the 'other status' group (based on Q12).
Base: parents who are eligible-but-not-receiving, soon eligible, or unsure of their status.

Primary schools vs. secondary schools

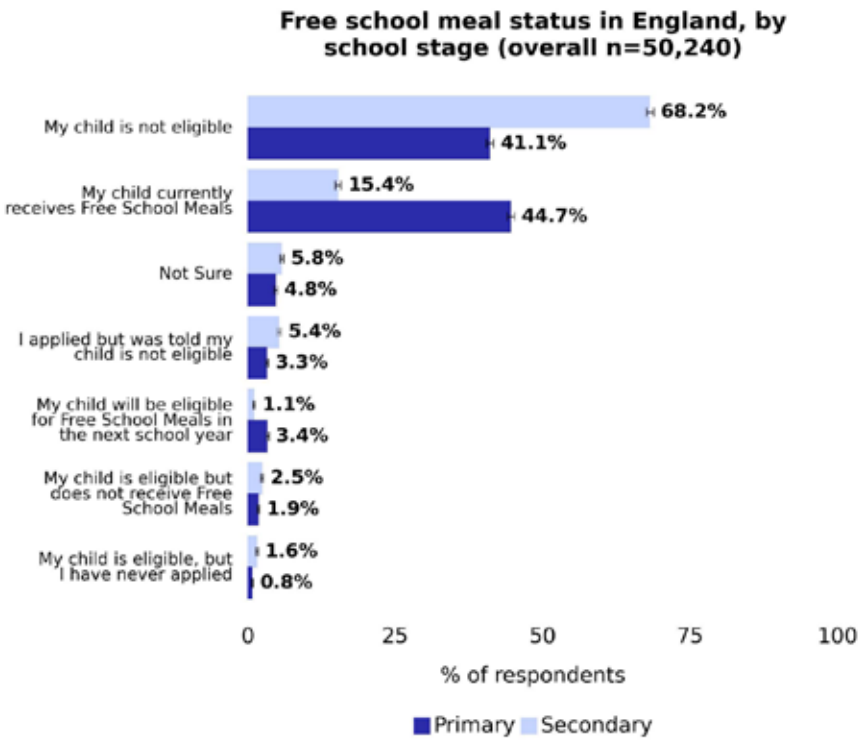
How children qualify for FSMs shifts as they move through school.

In the early years of primary school, many children qualify automatically. By secondary school, eligibility depends almost entirely on household income.

This shift shows up clearly in our data. Across England, Scotland, and Wales, 48.3% of parents say their primary school aged child currently receives FSMs, compared with just 14.9% of parents of secondary school aged children — a gap of over three times.

Route to free-school-meal eligibility in England, Scotland, and Wales, in primary versus secondary school

England





48.3%

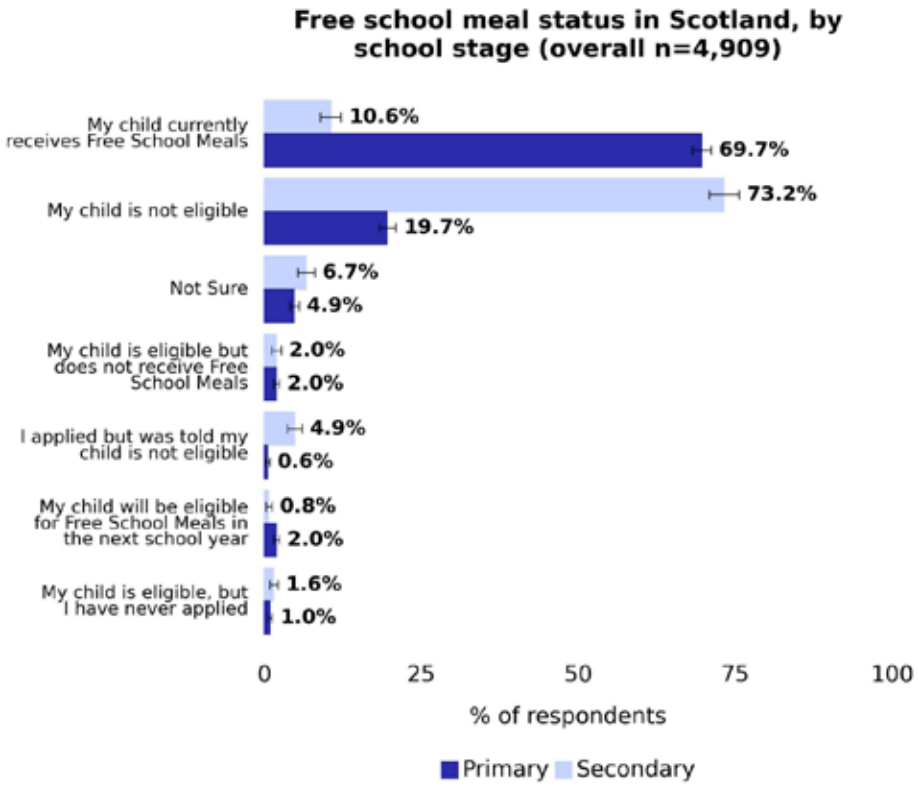
of primary school aged children receive free school meals

14.9%

of secondary school aged children receive free school meals

● Free school meals

Scotland



Wales

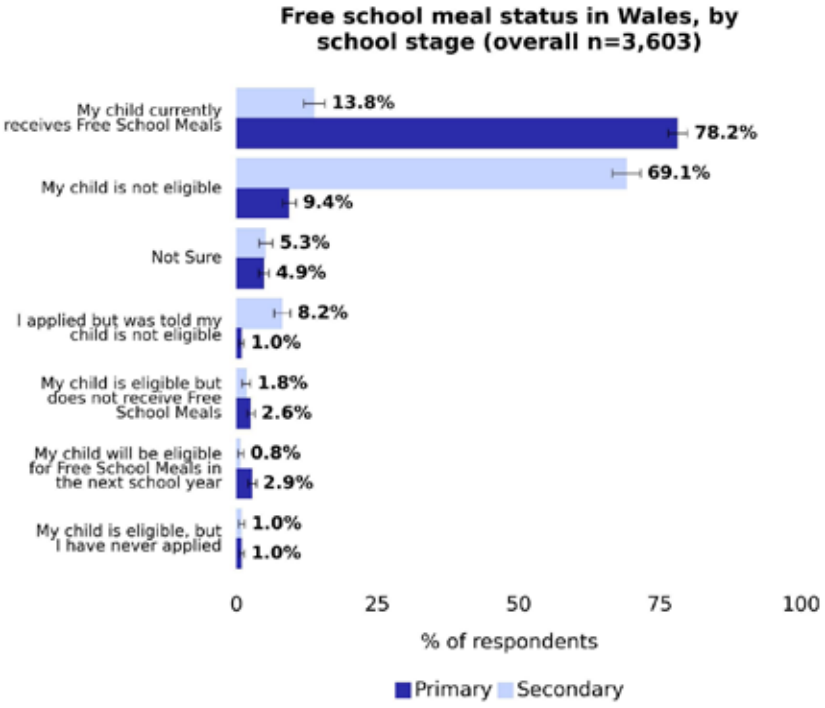


figure 3. Free-school-meal status in Scotland, England and Wales in primary versus secondary school (based on Q12). 95% confidence intervals shown.

The national breakdown

In Scotland and Wales, where free school meals are available to most or all primary pupils, around three-quarters of children qualify automatically.

In England, where universal provision currently ends after Year 2, more families qualify based on income, with data confirming that 73.7% of secondary school students and 23.5% of primary school pupils access FSMs via means tested eligibility routes. This is compared to 73.8% and 11.9% (respectively) in Scotland and 72.7% and 12.5% (respectively) in Wales (see figure 4).

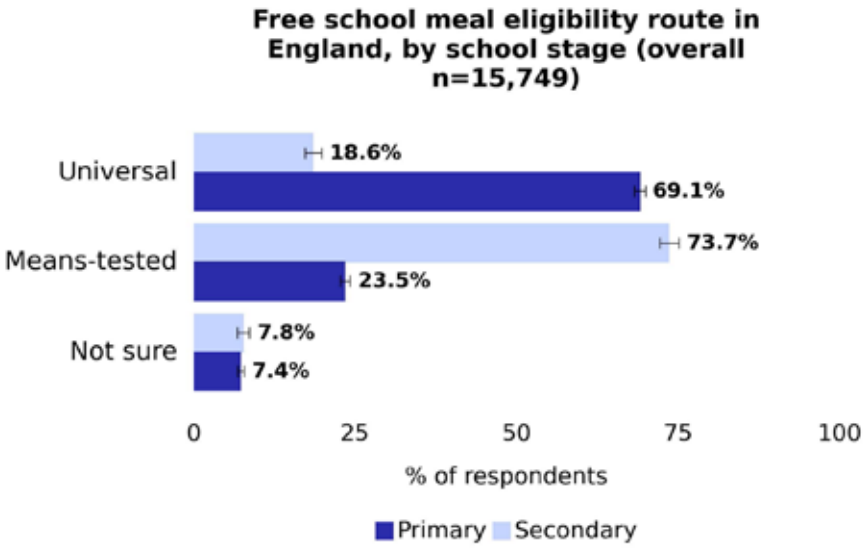
However, from September 2026, eligibility rules in England are set to expand.

FSMs will be available to all families receiving Universal Credit, removing the current income cap. This change is expected to increase the number of children qualifying through income-based eligibility, rather than automatic provision, with the Government estimating this will make 500,000+ more children eligible for FSMs.

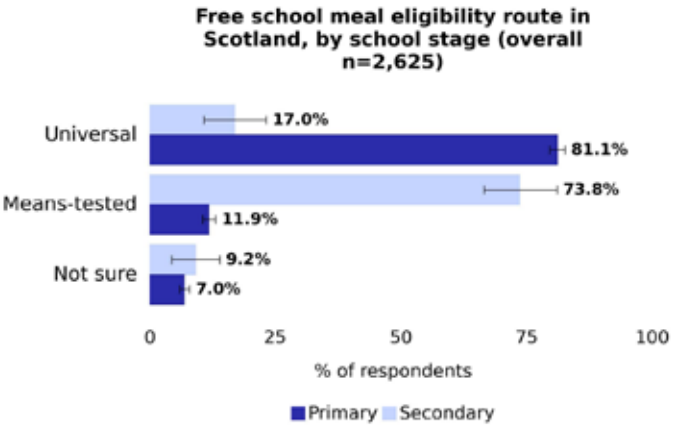


Route to free-school-meal eligibility in England, Scotland, and Wales, in primary versus secondary school

England



Scotland



Wales

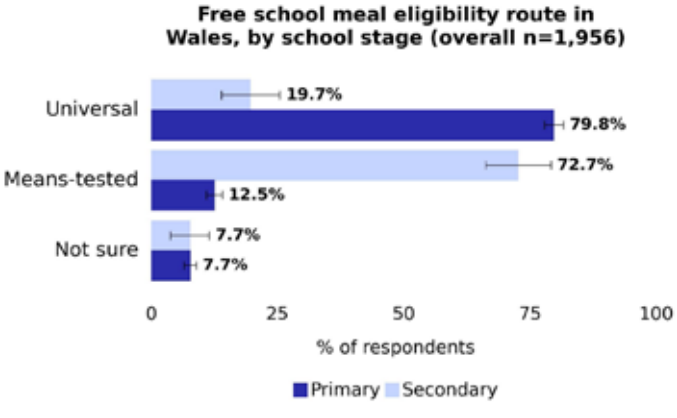


figure 4. Route to free-school-meal eligibility in England, Scotland, and Wales, in primary versus secondary school (based on Q13). Base: parents whose child currently gets free school meals. 95% confidence intervals shown.

Daily consumption of free school meals

To access current uptake of FSMs, we asked parents to tell us how often their child eats a FSM.

Of those eligible, 83% told us their child has a free school meal daily, while 17% told us they don't (see figure 5).

Our findings confirm that daily eating varies by country, with more (86%) eligible children eating FSMs each day in England, compared with Wales (75%) and Scotland (68%). Variations are also noticeable by school stage, with more children eating FSMs daily in secondary schools (88%) than in primary schools (81%). (see figure 6).

For school caterers, this points to a clear opportunity to target intervention that encourages more eligible pupils to become daily diners, particularly in Scotland and Wales, and across all UK primary settings.

86%

of eligible children in England eat free school meals

75%

of eligible children in Wales eat free school meals

68%

of eligible children in Scotland eat free school meals



From everyone in the survey to children who eat a free school meal every day



figure 5. From everyone in the survey to children who eat a free school meal every day.

How often children eat a free school meal, primary versus secondary school

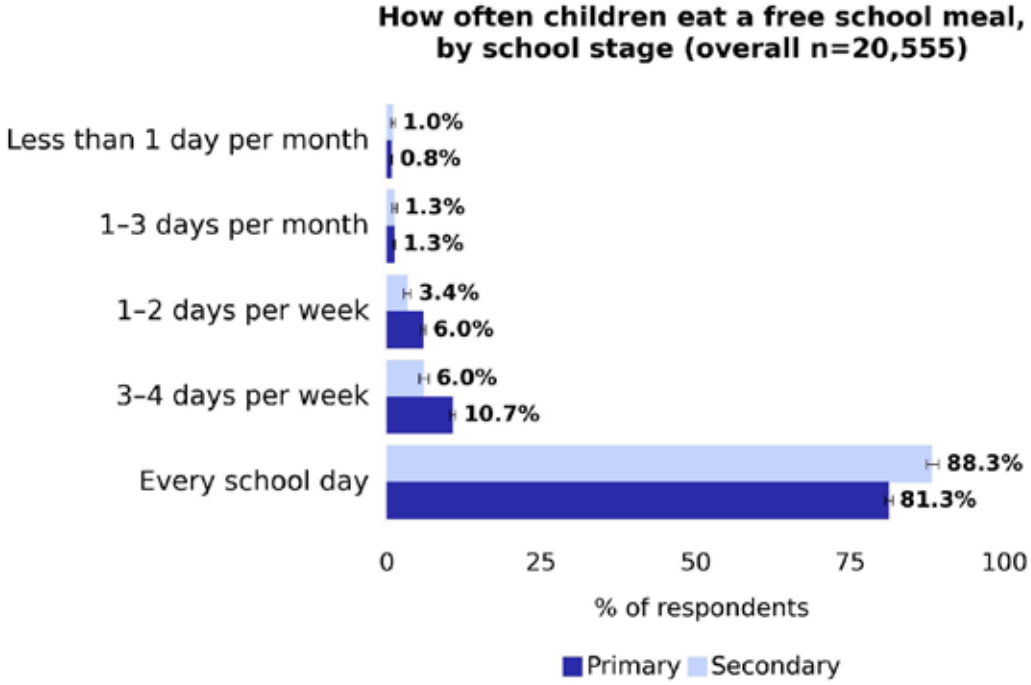


figure 6. How often children eat a free school meal, primary versus secondary school (based on Q15).
Base: parents whose child gets free school meals.

Barriers to daily uptake

So why don't more eligible children eat a FSM every day?

The data indicates that the reasons typically relate to preference, rather than circumstance, with 56% of parents saying their child doesn't always like the meal choices available. This is followed by a preference to packed lunches (31%) and concerns surrounding meal quality or dietary needs (11%). (see figure 7).

It's clear that children are more likely to eat FSMs every day when parents rate the food positively – 88% where parents rate the school meal as 'Good' or 'Excellent', compared to 76% when parents rate the meal as 'Average' or 'Worse' (see figure 8).

Since the biggest barriers relate to menu choice, refining what's on offer based on surveying pupils' preferences and/or expanding variety, could help school caterers close the daily FSM uptake gap. Improving parents' perception of FSMs provision via enhanced parental engagement is potentially another quick win for catering teams.

Most pupils who receive free school meals eat one every day

When they don't, it's usually down to pupil preference



Why some children do not eat a free school meal every day

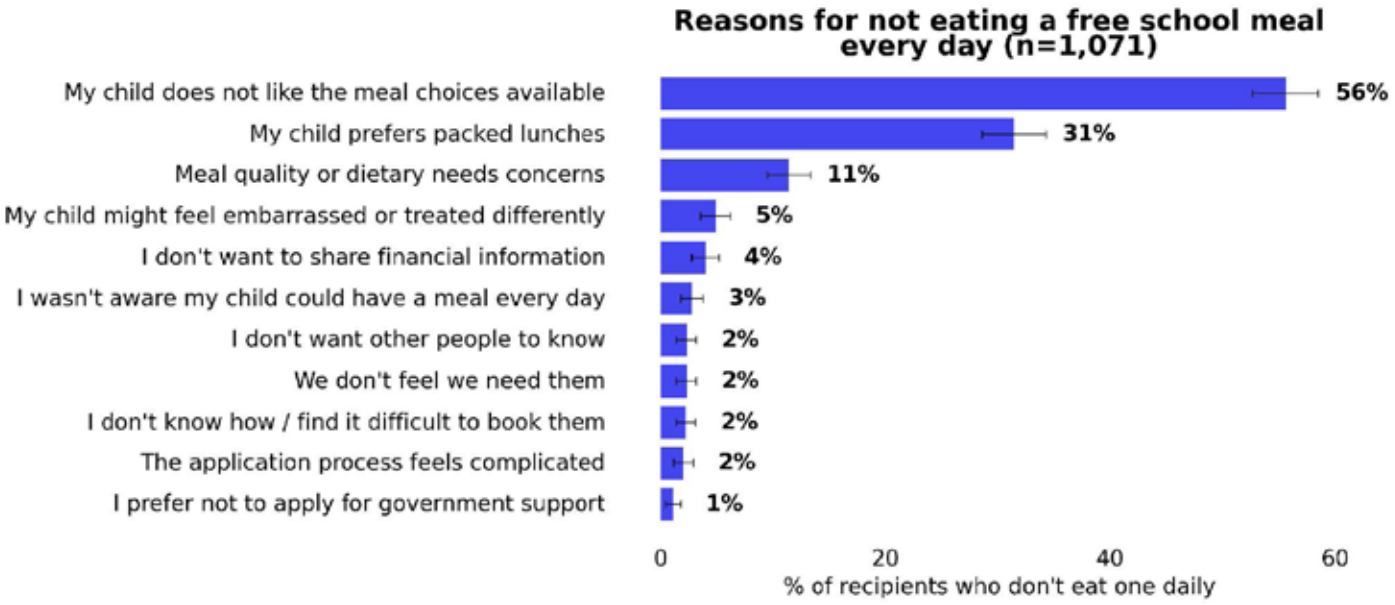


figure 7. Why some children do not eat a free school meal every day (based on Q16, select-all).
Base: parents who gave a reason. 'Prefer not to say' shown in the appendix.

Share of children eating a free school meal every day, where parents rate the food positively (Good or Excellent) versus average or worse

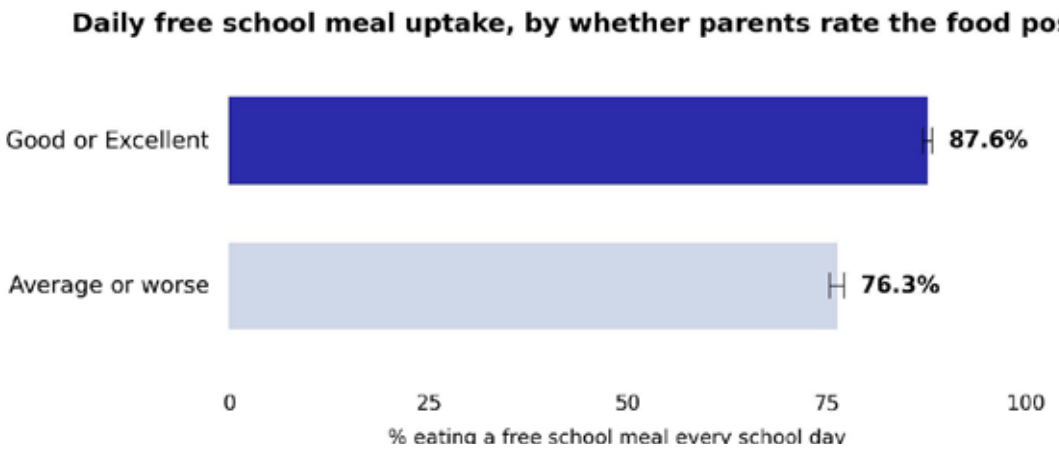


figure 8. Share of children eating a free school meal every day, where parents rate the food positively (Good or Excellent) versus average or worse (based on Q15 and Q19). Base: parents who answered both questions. The full rating-by-rating breakdown is in the appendix.

Are free school meals helping families?

Research links FSMs to positive health and education-related outcomes but what do parents think?

To find out, we asked parents of eligible children how much FSMs impact quality of life. Most (41%) told us FSMs improve their child's quality of life 'quite a lot' or a 'great deal', and another 28% said 'somewhat' (see figure 9).

However, the benefits of FSMs aren't felt equally by every family.

Families who speak another language at home are more likely to say FSMs 'help a lot', with 49% reporting a big impact, compared with 39% of English-speaking families (table 1).

By contrast, household make-up, number of children, and route to eligibility tell a much flatter story, with only small differences between groups (see main report appendix).

49%

of families who speak another language at home say free school meals 'help a lot'

39%

of English-speaking families say free school meals 'help a lot'



How much parents say free school meals improve their child's quality of life

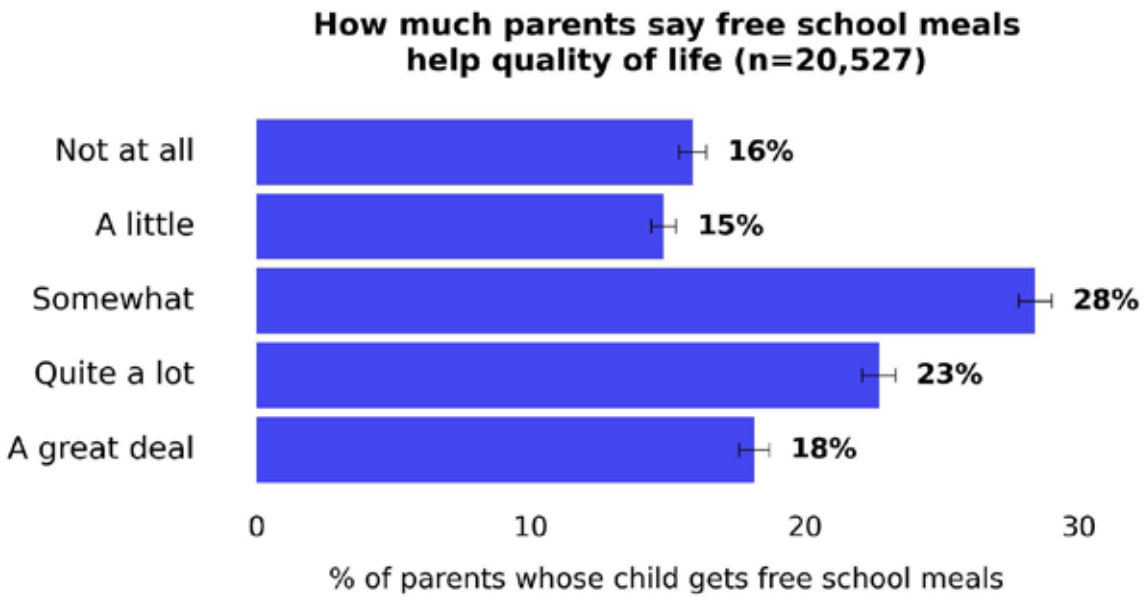


figure 9. How much parents say free school meals improve their child's quality of life (based on Q17).
Base: parents whose child gets free school meals. 95% confidence intervals shown.

Quality-of-life benefit of free school meals, split by home language

Group	n	% positive ratings	95% CI lower	95% CI upper
English main at home	17,291	38.4	37.6	39.1
Another language at home	4,503	48.5	47.0	49.9

table 1. Quality-of-life benefit of free school meals, split by home language (based on Q17 and Q03).
Positive-rating share by meal-quality rating (figure 10).

Exploring parents' ratings and perceived quality of life impact

How much parents say FSMs contribute to quality of life is closely linked to how they rate the food

Where parents think the food is 'Excellent', well over two-thirds (77%) say it helps a lot. Where they think it's 'Extremely poor', only about one in eight (12%) say the same (see figure 10).

Our research looked at various other factors and how parents associate them with helping quality of life and found that how parents rate the food, on both its quality and how satisfied they are with it, is the factor most strongly associated with a parent saying FSMs help improve perceived quality of life a lot.

Interestingly, factors like, where the family lives, how they qualify for FSMs, and school stage make little difference (see table 2 or the full model in the main report appendix: Quality-of-life model). This makes a strong case for increasing engagement with parents to communicate the quality and value of the FSM offer and drive improved perception.

77%

of parents say that when the food is 'Excellent', their child's quality of life improves

How much free school meals help, shown as the full range of answers at each level of food rating

What we compared	Share of the difference explained	Linked to	p-value
How parents rate the food (quality and satisfaction)	95%	more help	<0.001

Factors with little predictive power (each explains under 1% of the difference)

How much free school meals help, shown as the full range of answers at each level of food rating

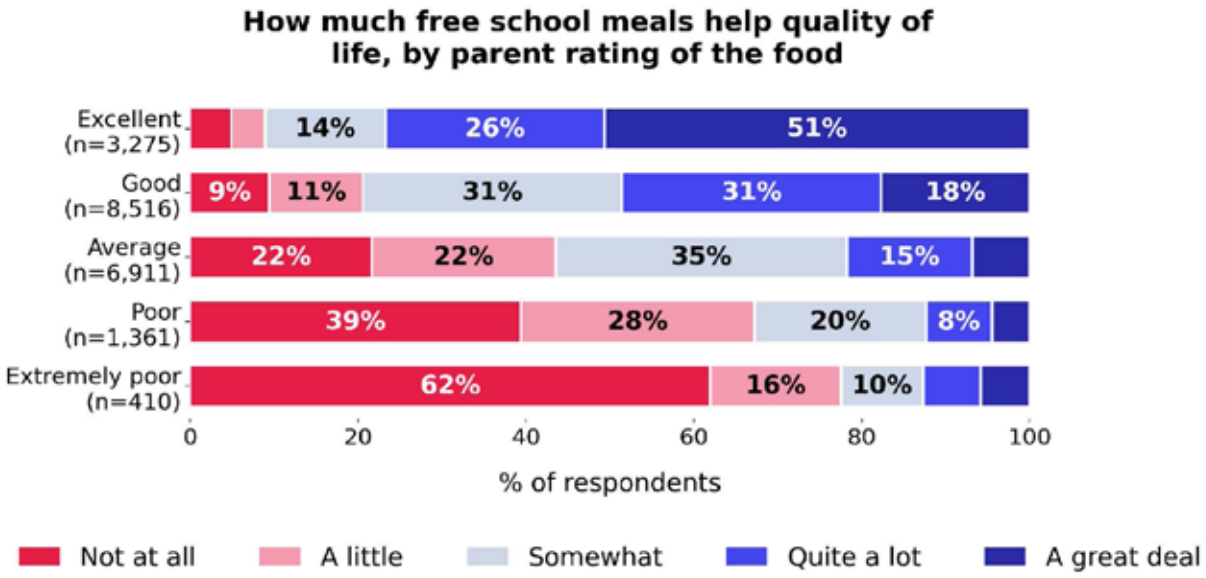


figure 10. How much free school meals help, shown as the full range of answers at each level of food rating (based on Q17 and Q19). Each bar totals 100%. Segments below 7% are not labelled, for legibility.

What is linked to parents saying free school meals help a lot to improve QoL

What we compared	Share of the difference explained	Linked to	p-value
How the family qualifies (means-tested vs universal)	1.9%	more help	<0.001
Where the family lives	0.5%	less help	0.180
Household make-up (single vs two adults)	0.7%	more help	<0.001
School stage (primary vs secondary)	0.4%	more help	0.075
Number of children	0.3%	more help	0.036

table 2. What is linked to parents saying free school meals help a lot to improve QoL (based on Q17). Factors are ordered by how much of the difference between parents they explain. Overall, the things measured here explain only part of why some families feel the meals help more than others; among the part they do explain, how parents rate the food is almost all of it (98%). With this many responses almost every factor tests as statistically significant, so the share column, not the p-value, shows what matters. Full detail in the appendix.

Spotlight on breakfast clubs

Breakfast clubs are becoming a UK-wide priority, with each nation taking its own path to ensure children start every school day with a nutritious, filling meal.

Wales has placed a statutory duty on local authorities to provide free breakfasts at primary schools since 2004. England's Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act now legally requires every state primary school to offer a free breakfast club. And Scotland has committed £15 million to deliver a universal offer for all primary and special school pupils by August 2027.

For caterers, this signals a shift: breakfast provision is moving from a model targeted at schools with high numbers of pupils eligible for FSMs to one that's genuinely universal.

View the full report

- Breakfast clubs



Appetite for breakfast club provision

To assess what provision is available, we asked parents to tell us if their child's school offers a breakfast club.

Significantly more parents of primary school aged children (73%) said their child's school currently runs a breakfast club, compared to just 27% of parents of secondary school aged children. Interestingly, around one third (34%) of secondary school parents told us they weren't sure if their child's school offered a breakfast club (see figure 12).



Where a breakfast club does exist, 11% of parents told us they send their child 'every day', 15% 'a few days a week', and another 20% only 'occasionally' (see figure 13).

Where there is no breakfast club yet, only 8% of parents said they'd send their child 'every day', 11% 'a few days a week', and 26% 'occasionally' (see figure 13).

The data suggests interest is mostly occasional rather than daily, and in both groups (primary and secondary).

However, as over half of parents reported they would 'never' send their child to either an existing (54%) or hypothetical (55%) breakfast club, use of clubs would likely be concentrated among a minority of families.

11%

of parents send their children every day

15%

of parents send their child a few days a week

20%

of parents send their child occasionally

Whether the school runs a breakfast club, primary versus secondary school

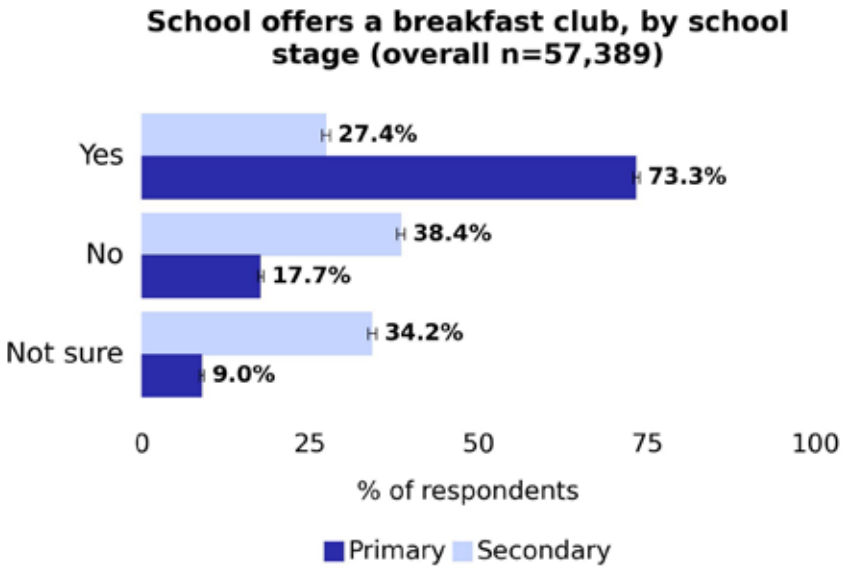


figure 12. Whether the school runs a breakfast club, primary versus secondary school (based on Q38). 95% confidence intervals shown.

How often parents send their child to a breakfast club

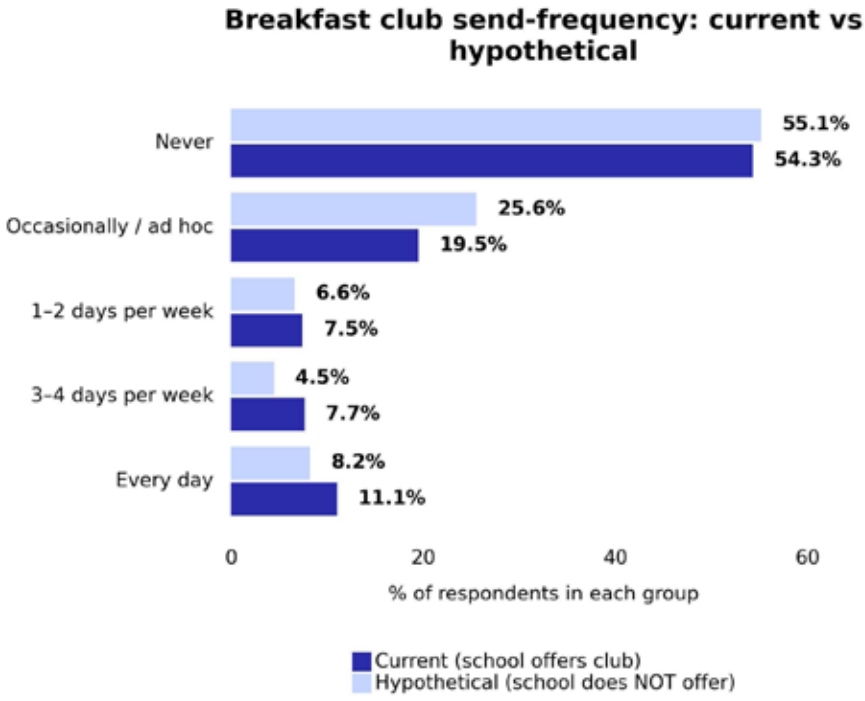


figure 13. How often parents send their child to a breakfast club: where one is offered, and where one is not but could be (based on Q39 and Q40). Each set of bars is worked out against its own group.

The big draw for parents

When we asked parents what would tip the balance and get their child through the door, 'childcare' came out on top by a wide margin, named by 49% – well ahead of 'a free healthy meal' (29%) and 'the chance to eat with friends' (26%) (see figure 14).

The childcare benefit matters more to some families than others, particularly those receiving FSMs and single parent households. For FSM families specifically, childcare is the top reason, with 59% naming it as their primary motivation, compared to 49% across all parents pooled together (see red dots FSM parents vs. grey bars on figure 14).

For school caterers, marketing breakfast club provision around childcare value, as well as the food offer, could be a more effective way to boost uptake, particularly among FSM and single-parent families.



What encourages parents to use a breakfast club

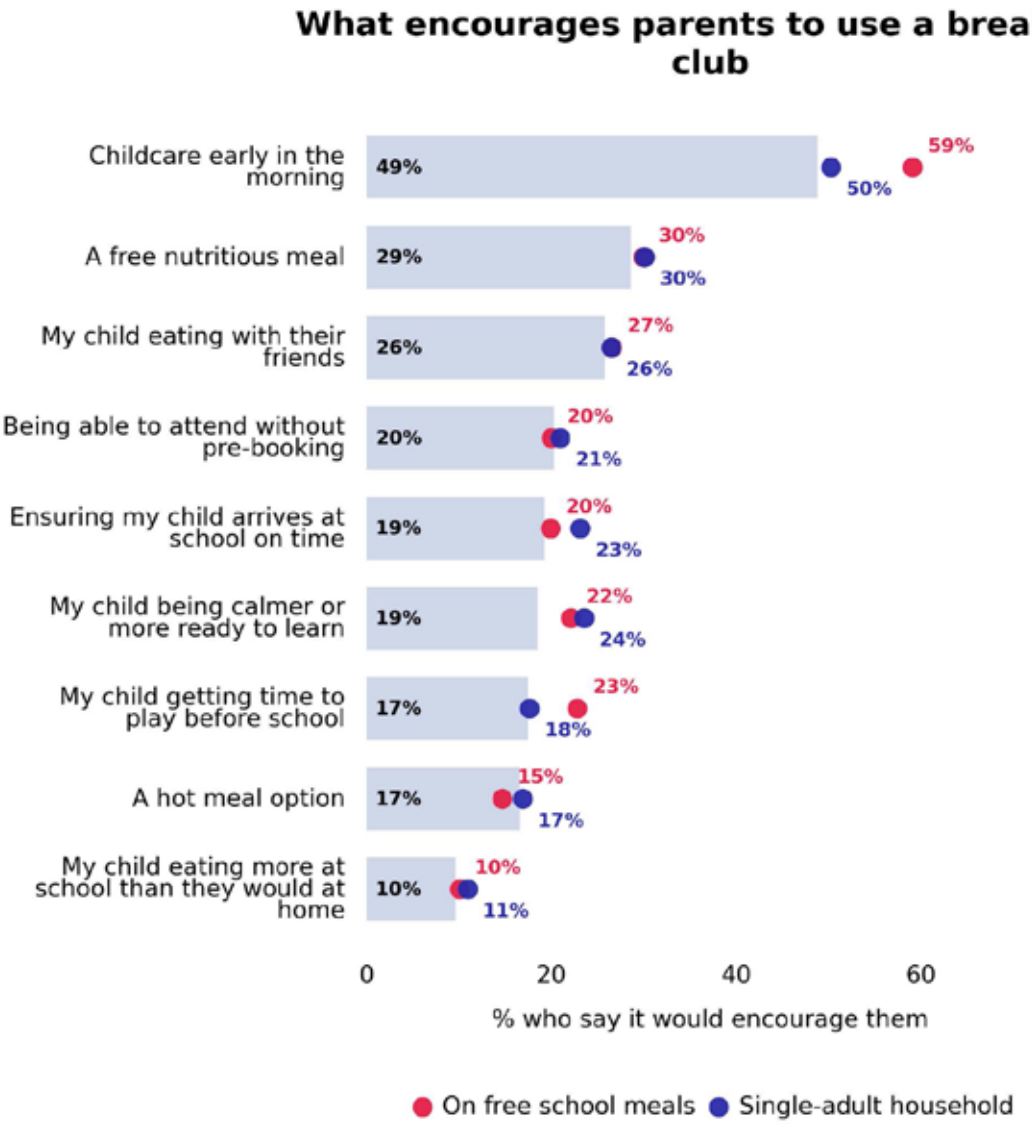


figure 14. What encourages parents to use a breakfast club: the bars show all parents (with the %), the points show families who get free school meals and single-adult homes (Q41, select-all; see main report appendix for question wording). Base: all parents n=25,559; on free school meals n=9,328; single-adult homes n=5,264.

49%
would use breakfast clubs for childcare

29%
for a free healthy meal

26%
so their child can eat with their friends

Creating more time for learning.

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