



Universal Free School Meals

Parents asynchronous online interviews

December 2023



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Methodology

This research was conducted with a broad range of parents via an online qualitative research platform, Recollective, from Wednesday the 8th to Friday the 24th of November.

The study was split into two parts:



Digital diary study: a one-week diary to prompt parents to have conversations with child(ren) and dependent(s) about their experiences of UFSM and begin to think about the wider impacts of the scheme on both themselves and their families



Asynchronous online interview: a reflective sequence of mixed methods activities and questions that dig deeper into key questions around impacts on finance, mental health and wellbeing.



Sample

The sample was made up of **22 parents and carers** of at least one child or dependent currently attending a state primary school in years 3 to 6 and receiving free school meals. The following key quotas were also met:

- **Eligibility of free school meals:** 5 x parents eligible for free school meals in the past but declined at the time.
- **Child(ren) / dependent(s) dietary requirements:** 2 x dairy allergy, 2 x halal, 2 x kosher, 1 x sensory difficulties with food, 1 x vegetarian and 1 x vegan.
- **Special educational needs / disabilities:** 5 x currently on SEN registered, EHCP or waiting to be assessed.
- **Low annual household income:** 15 x earning under £25k
- **Single parents / carers:** 8 x total

Further to this, a broad range of ages of parents / carers, social grades, gender of parents / carers, age and number of child(ren) / dependent(s), benefits received, ethnicities and borough of primary schools within the sample were ensured.

Given that this is a sample comprising 22 parents participating in qualitative research, the scalability of the themes identified cannot be definitively validated. This has been explored in subsequent research, which included parent polling.



Background to the research

In February 2023, the Mayor announced an historic £135m emergency, one-off funding plan to help families with the spiralling cost of living by ensuring that every state primary schoolchild in London will receive free school meals in the next academic year. This funding is not intended to displace funding provided by central government for universal infant free school meals (UIFSM) for all children in Key Stage 1 (KS1) or for those children eligible for free school meals (FSM) in Key Stage 2 (KS2). Instead, the funding will provide FSM to children in KS2 who are not currently eligible.

Primary schools across London implemented the Universal Free School Meals Policy in September for the academic year 2023/24.

The Opinion Research Team was commissioned to conduct qualitative research with parents to understand experience and impact of the introduction of Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) according to the Bremner Consulting Theory of Change. This research primarily focused on impact on household financial circumstances, mental health and wellbeing.



Executive summary: part one

1. Quality, nutrition, and satisfaction:

Substantial variability in school meal quality and nutrition exists, with concerns about vegetable consumption, excessive sugar, and processed foods. Drivers of satisfaction for parents include nutritional content, while children's satisfaction often aligns with familiar home-cooked meals. The lack of vegetables is a common point of dissatisfaction for parents, while children may express displeasure with the presence of vegetables.

2. Nutritional comparison with packed lunches:

Divergence exists in parents' opinions on whether UFSM or packed lunches are healthier, influenced by individual definitions and values regarding nutrition. Parents favouring packed lunches emphasise the volume of vegetables, while those valuing UFSM highlight the absence of junk foods.

3. Value of hot meals:

Parents universally value the assurance of their children receiving hot meals, particularly during colder months, where they reflect positively on the comfort of receiving one. A few children also express a distinct preference for warm meals, with one actively favouring them, especially during the winter months.

4. Range, choice, and size of school meals:

Challenges arise in the availability and flexibility of choices, motivating parents to provide packed lunches on specific days. Instances of items running out result in children going hungry or receiving smaller portions, contributing to parental dissatisfaction.

5. Portion size and hunger:

Dissatisfaction with small portions is a significant driver, prompting concerns about hunger and leading some parents to opt for packed lunches. This is particularly true for days where a child may have sports activities.



Executive summary: part two

6. Dietary requirements:

Navigating dietary requirements adds complexity, with challenges for religious observances, vegetarianism, veganism, and special educational needs. These complexities are a large driver to switch to packed lunches where parents can afford it.

One halal respondent highlighted that their child has not been happy with their school meals as there is little variety and her portions are smaller than her counterparts. Another expressed that there is not a halal option every single day, but that they think it's great that the school caters to this population despite its small presence in their local area.

For parents of children with vegetarian / vegan diets, there is acknowledgement of the limitation of what can be provided for school meals – there is a sense that this is part and parcel of the experience for these children.

7. Financial savings:

Financial benefits of UFSM serve as a buffer or lifeline, impacting families with special dietary needs and contributing to overall mental well-being. Trade-offs involve managing portions, dealing with potential snacking consequences, and addressing the inability to monitor children's food intake.

For some parents, the financial impact isn't confined to savings on packed lunch ingredients alone; it extends to their entire food budget. One parent has taken to provision of healthier and lighter evening meals in the knowledge that their children has had a hot meal at lunchtime. Another, who uses food banks, quantified weekly savings as £15 which they use for food at home instead.

8. Time saved:

UFSM reshapes morning routines, offering newfound time for essential tasks and contributing positively to family dynamics, mental well-being, and stress reduction.

The impact on family dynamics is noticeable, with shared breakfasts becoming a valued routine, including activities like braiding hair, enjoying breakfast, or catching an occasional cartoon.



Executive summary: part three

9. Parental observations of well-being benefits for children:

Parents observed a broad range of positive impacts including a sense of inclusion due to the communal aspect of meals, a sense of equality due to sitting down together to eat the same meal, support for special education needs due to structure, improved table manners, communication, independence, and developing healthy eating habits.

10. Challenges in pupil experience:

Time constraints and rushed lunches present challenges, impacting how children engage with and perceive their mealtime experience. While some children adeptly adapt to the time constraints, eating quickly without complaints, others may opt out of free meals due to perceived inconveniences associated with the process.



Quotes from children



What is your favourite thing about school meals?

- “It’s tasty and filling and you get to have desert. It’s yummy.”
- “Most of my friends have them as well so it’s nice we can go together.”
- “Being with my friends and having the same meal.”
- “The food is always warm.”
- “I love having pasta with tomato sauce. It’s my favourite meal at home.”
- “The food is so yummy!”
- “We have yummy baguettes.”
- “Fish and chips on a Friday!”
- “Eating with my friends.”
- “Sometimes we have extra jelly.”
- “Break from lessons and time to relax.”
- “I get something different every day. I also like that the meals are warm.”
- “If I had to choose I would say puddings.”
- “Sitting down to eat with friends.”



What is your least favourite thing about school meals?

- “Sometimes the cheese they use tastes funny and the dinner ladies make you finish all the food.”
- “Seeing packed lunches having loads of snacks from home.”
- “They give you too little. One time they gave me 7 chips.”
- “There is not a selection of foods to choose from.”
- “Sometimes I don’t get what I ordered.”
- “It smells weird and doesn’t look nice.”
- “Having to eat the pudding if I don’t like it.”
- “They don’t have biscuits.”
- “I have an apple for dessert because everything else has dairy.”
- “When I don’t like either of the options on the menu and have to eat off the salad bar.”
- “They don’t give enough chicken and gravy is like water.”
- “It’s not as nice as food at home or in a restaurant.”
- “They taste funny and I don’t like it. I don’t like fish so don’t want that on a Friday.”
- “Sometimes they don’t taste very yummy and don’t fill my belly up.”



Health and meals

Quality, nutrition and satisfaction

Both the quality and nutrition of free school meals differ day-to-day and school-to-school; whilst some offer salad bars others reportedly provide no vegetables at all. Whilst most offer hot food daily, some reportedly only offer cold sandwiches. This results in substantial variability in satisfaction with meal quality and nutrition.

Drivers of satisfaction for parents / carers

A primary driver for satisfaction is concern about nutritional content, though this concern is not universal. Approximately half of parents expressed concern in this area. These concerns are largely around vegetable consumption, excessive sugar and presence of processed foods. For some, this prompts provision of packed lunches on days where the menu is seen as particularly unhealthy. For highly satisfied parents, their concerns often shift to the enjoyability of the food – although this is not seen as a real issue as long as the child returns home full.

Drivers of satisfaction for children

When some children encounter food they are accustomed to at home, their satisfaction is higher, even if it contrasts with what parents deem as healthy (e.g., fish fingers and burgers). Conversely, when children dislike the provided food, they are more likely to abstain from eating, potentially leading to hunger when they return home.

The vegetable controversy

When parents express dissatisfaction with the nutrition of free school meals, they often cite the lack of vegetables. Conversely, when children are dissatisfied with the food served, they frequently point to the existence of vegetables as a source of discontent. Parents being able to provide vegetables that children enjoy is a driver for providing packed lunches on some days, irrespective of the financial burden.

“[They had] Jacket potato with baked beans. Baked beans are extremely high in sugar, so I’m curious to know whether they used a low-sugar version.” **Parent of three children including one SEN**

“She likes the tuna pasta but I don’t think it’s very nutritious personally. I think she likes items that he would usually eat at home.” **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

“[I] just feel that the lunches choices for children who don’t eat a lot of vegetables (knowingly as opposed to them being hidden in things like tomato sauce where you can add peppers / carrots etc if blended) is limited to unhealthy options. There was no salad side offer and my son would have picked lettuce and cucumber if he had had that choice.” **Low-income single-parent a child with SEN**

“I’m a massive fan of the salad bar, I love the fact that there’s access to fruit and vegetables readily.” **Low-income parent of two children including one SEN**

“Pasta and sponge cake are very carb-y, and if the tomato sauce was a cheap pre-made one (I stress *if*, as I don’t know if it was or not), then they’re very sugary... as is the cake. That said, of course I understand about budgets, etc.” **Parent of three children including one SEN**

“There are certain moral concerns about eating beef in schools... not least that the budget will only allow for buying/cooking/eating pretty low quality beef mince, and this is really not healthy.” **Parent of three children including one SEN**

“He often feels the food does not have flavour. I would say that they’re healthy but not enjoyable.” **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

“I prefer it if my kids had dinner every day as [it’s the] healthier option.” **Low-income single parent of two children**

“If he ate more vegetables I think he would have a better diet at school but right he doesn’t like them!” **Low-income single-parent a child with SEN**

“She likes the tuna pasta but I don’t think it’s very nutritious personally.” **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

Nutritional comparison of free school meals and packed lunches

When comparing the nutrition of free school meals to the packed lunches parents / carers would otherwise provide, respondents were divided on what would be healthier. This divergence appears to stem, in part, from individual parents' definitions and values regarding nutrition.

Those who favour packed lunches

Many parents who prefer packed lunches equate 'healthy meals' with the volume of vegetables. If their children do not receive an ample amount in their free school meals, some parents are more inclined to favour packed lunches.

Parents with a heightened understanding of nutrition are more likely to favour the nutritional value of the packed lunches they prepare. They point to the well-rounded balance of meals, incorporating essential food groups like carbs, protein, and fats.

Those who value free school meals

A prevalent viewpoint among parents that favour free school meals is the absence of junk foods such as crisps, sweets, and chocolate, which is considered a substantial health advantage.

A couple of parents were more likely to associate variation of food with health and nutrition, and therefore favoured free school meals due to children being able to try new foods from a range of choices.

"I believe that many of our son's friends' packed lunches from previous years were pretty unhealthy, for a variety of reasons - not least habit, time, expense, and understanding of nutrition - so, free school meals are particularly good for them." **Parent of three children including one SEN**

"If she took packed lunches there probably would be difference nutritionally as I like to give my kids healthier food." **Parent of four kosher children including one vegetarian**

"I try to make sure there's veg/fruit, some form of dairy, protein and carb so I feel my lunches are more balanced although I admit the school do try." **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

"I like the lack of chocolate and sweets and the exposure the children get to a range of foods." **Low-income parent of two children including one SEN**

"I think I'd much prefer to give my daughter a home packed lunch for school as I know exactly what she has eaten and how much. But it's not affordable and a free meal is helpful so I can't even complain." **Low-income parent of three halal and vegetarian children**

"I find the school meals would be healthier as they have to meet certain health standards so making sure it's a healthy balanced meal, whereas packed lunches you can put pretty much what you want in there so crisps or cake bars etc." **Low-income parent of two including one SEN**

"Because he chooses the unhealthy options most days, I think a packed lunch with crisps, sandwich etc is on a par for healthiness." **Low-income single-parent a child with SEN**

"I could make more healthy but also more appealing meals for him but it's given me the opportunity to try and get him to try new meals at school." **Low-income single-parent a child with SEN**

The value of hot meals

Parents universally value the assurance that their children are receiving hot food as part of their free school meals, with this sentiment resonating consistently across all demographics of parents.

Comfort and appreciation

Parents express a sense of appreciation for the comfort provided by hot meals, with some preferring them even on days when menu options might be less appealing.

Seasonal importance

This appreciation for hot meals gains added significance during colder weather, reflecting a shared sentiment among parents that warm meals are particularly comforting in winter months.

Children's preferences

Interestingly, children echo this sentiment. A few children express a distinct preference for warm meals, with one actively favouring them, especially during the winter months.

Variability in provision

It's essential to acknowledge that not all schools provide hot meals. For instance, one parent reported that their child's school, which follows a kosher food provider, had unfortunately gone out of business. Consequently, their child or dependents now receive cold sandwiches instead of the expected warm meals. This instance sheds light on the variability in meal provision across different schools, highlighting the challenges faced by some parents / carers in ensuring their children receive warm and nourishing meals as part of their school experience.

"The food is always warm, and that's important." **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

"My son had a pack lunch today as he didn't like ne think of the menu. To be honest I would of liked him to have a hot school dinner on a cold rainy day like this." **Low-income single parent of two children**

"It's a hot meal which is the main thing." **Low-income parent of one**

"She prefers school lunches because they are warm." **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

"Overall experience of free school meals is great, particularly now the cold weather's here. I think it's great that children have something warm inside them. My son particularly prefers them in the winter." **Low-income parent of two children including one SEN**

"Alina has said the food is hot but can often be bland and/or "mushy" as in overcooked." **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

"He gets a hot meal every day that he doesn't complain about." **Low-income parent of one child with allergies**

Range and choice

Parents highlighted various challenges and concerns regarding availability of choices and range of choices themselves. This becomes a significant motivator for opting to provide packed lunches on specific days, particularly when faced with insufficient or unsuitable meal options – whether due to children's preferences or unmet dietary requirements (the latter is explored in a subsequent slide).

Range of choices

For children, range of choices for lunch is a large driver as to whether they will opt for them. There is a sense of resignation to this issue, and it is for the most part accepted by parents that there will be days that they will need to send their child in with packed lunch e.g. 'fish Fridays'.

Some parents expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of flexibility in pre-made lunches, restricting the ability to omit certain ingredients disliked by their children. This challenge is particularly pronounced for those with additional educational needs, occasionally leading to the use of packed lunches as an alternative.

Availability of choices

Even when a suitable meal is listed on the menu, occurrences of items running out have become more noticeable since the implementation of Universal Free School Meals. This issue often results in children opting to go hungry or being served smaller portions. One parent shared their frustration as their child received an extra potato in lieu of chicken that had run out, leaving them hungry upon returning home. Another parent highlighted that their child went without vegetables due to shortages, with younger children being prioritised as they are deemed to need it more.

"My son was shown the menu at school for today and only liked the chicken wrap and the pizza slice - but they were sold out when it was his time for lunch. Therefore he ate nothing a school today / Frustrated about the lack of food available in the popular items - most kids in his class wanted the same as him and got it before him so he had to go without." **Low-income single-parent a child with SEN**

"It sounds like the food options are all or nothing i.e. you can't ask for a chicken wrap with no mayonnaise or salad if you don't like those elements." **Low-income single-parent a child with SEN**

"Today was roast chicken, Yorkshire pudding broccoli and potatoes. She has come home hungry today saying there wasn't enough chicken and that she was given an extra potatoes to make up for it. That is disgusting and not acceptable to feed a child like that. I understand there are hundreds of children to feed and serve at lunch but the fact that not enough lunches to go around is not acceptable. It doesn't matter if they are free school meals a child needs to be fed." **Low-income parent of three halal and vegetarian children**

"[My son and daughter had] fish and chips with beans. This is their favourite day of the week where my daughter actively opts for schools dinners as opposed to a packed lunch." **Parent of two halal and disabled children**

"A packed lunch was provided for my children today as Friday at their school is fish Friday and they don't like fish or the alternate option. So to ensure they enjoy their lunch and actually eat it they chose a packed lunch." **Low-income parent of two including one SEN**

"I gave her packed lunch as she doesn't like the sandwiches they provide on Fridays." **Parent of one kosher child**

"She didn't eat [a school meal] as there was nothing she fancied." **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

"She enjoyed her lunch even though there was not enough veg to go around so she was told that year 6 can't have any as the little ones needed it more." **Low-income parent of three halal and vegetarian children**

"Generally there's always something to eat that she likes but we do have a couple of times a week where she takes in a packed lunch because she doesn't like the offer." **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

"Unfortunately if there's something he doesn't like then he's often left hungry." **Low-income parent of two children including one SEN**

"There are days where they'll have a packed lunch because they don't like the options." **Low-income single-parent of two**

Portion size and hunger

Some parents express dissatisfaction with perceived small portions, advocating for larger servings to address persistent hunger issues. This is one of the largest drivers of dissatisfaction for parents and children alike.

Concerns about portion sizes

Observations suggest diminishing sizes, particularly for children who previously received free school meals before the introduction of UFSM. This raises concerns and prompts some parents to opt for packed lunches, seeking to ensure their child receives a more satisfying and substantial meal.

Challenges in meeting hunger needs

Instances of students returning home hungry and receiving small portions underscore the challenges faced by the schools in meeting the hunger needs of all students. Additionally, parents incur additional costs as they provide supplementary meals to fulfil their child's nutritional requirements – if this is unaffordable, as one parent said, they may skip meals to feed their child.

Health implications of snacking

It is worth noting that some parents have observed that when their child or dependent comes home hungry, they tend to opt for snacks, introducing an element of contradiction to the concept of a healthy lunch. This observation highlights the complex dynamics involved in ensuring not just the provision of meals but also their adequacy and nutritional value.

Opting for packed lunches

For all of the reasons above, parents will occasionally opt for packed lunches to ensure that their child is fed a substantial meal. This is particularly true for days where a child may have sports activities.

“He’s mentioned now that portions are quite small and he thinks that they’ve gotten smaller since everyone has [free school meals] now. On those days where he feels extra hungry, he’ll come home and snack, snack snack which can be contradictory to the idea of a healthy lunch.” **Low-income parent of two children including one SEN**

“My main concern is that portions are really small, so he comes out absolutely starving. If he has football training I’m having to take a packed lunch up for him anyway to keep them full.” **Low-income single parent of two children**

“It is better than no food, but he still comes home very hungry so I still have to go without a meal to feed him a couple of days a week in the evening.” **Low-income single-parent a child with SEN**

“I do think that there could be bigger portions [of school meals].” **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

“She does often have packed lunches because she’s worried that she’s not going to get enough.” **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

He is large for his age so always complains that he does not have enough to eat. **Low-income single-parent a child with SEN**

“As my children have gotten older they’ve gotten more fussy... they keep coming home hungry. I prefer packed lunches because I know what they’ve eaten because it comes back in their lunchbox.” **Low-income parent of two including one SEN**

“[My children both] came home very hungry as the portions were very small.” **Low-income single-parent of two**

“She enjoyed her lunch even though there was not enough veg to go around so she was told that year 6 can’t have any as the little ones needed it more.” **Low-income parent of three halal and vegetarian children**

“They enjoyed it overall and we’re happy with the portion sizes. [They had] burger, wedges, cake and custard.” **Low-income single-parent of two**

Dietary requirements

Navigating dietary requirements adds a layer of complexity to the provision of school meals, with experiences reflecting a mix of successes and challenges. The latter is often tied to the inherent limitations in available options, a challenge that echoes the potential constraints of assembling a packed lunch.

Religious observances

For parents of children who follow religious diets there can be additional challenges. One halal respondent highlighted that their child has not been happy with their school meals as there is little variety and her portions are smaller than her counterparts. Another expressed that there is not a halal option every single day, but that they think it's great that the school caters to this population despite its small presence in their local area.

Parents of kosher children attending Jewish schools generally report satisfaction with offerings, as these schools are typically well-equipped to meet kosher dietary requirements.

There exists a spectrum of satisfaction among parents, ranging from contentment with the provided options to frustration due to limited offers. Parents who cannot afford packed lunches as an alternative often find the limited choices more challenging.

Vegetarianism and veganism

For parents of children with vegetarian / vegan diets, there is acknowledgement of the limitation of what can be provided for school meals – there is a sense that this is part and parcel of the experience for these children. One parent / carer of a child with a vegetarian and kosher diet said that they tend to consume a carb-heavy diet during school meals, but that their satisfaction, lack of complaints, and consistent consumption signal contentment.

Special education needs

Parents of children with special education needs recognize the likelihood of needing to send packed lunches as an alternative to sensory overwhelming or unsuitable meal choices. While generally accepted as a limitation, one parent highlighted the occasional challenge of their child having to eat in a special room on bad days, leading to meals being cold when they are eventually delivered to them.

Specific preferences

Certain children, driven by selective preferences, experience repetitive meals. While parents generally accept this as a common aspect of childhood "fussiness," there is a noted desire for more flexibility in accommodating modifications to meals, such as ability to remove specific ingredients, to cater to individual preferences.

"The choices for children with allergies is too restrictive and the portions and time available to eat are too small." **Low-income single parent of one child with allergies**

"My kids attend a school that actually provides halal meat, but it's not five days a week. It's great that the school actually caters for the Muslim population, which is not massive in Sutton. Chicken strips are Halal. But the chicken burgers on another day are not. They provide a veg option for that day." **Parent of two halal and disabled children**

"[My daughter] is strictly gluten-free because she's celiac and follows a kosher diet. She seems pretty happy with school meals, even though they're carb heavy. I never get complaints and she always eats the food. She loves pasta so this is her favourite school lunch (gluten free pasta)." **Parent of four kosher children including one vegetarian**

"Just that he is having the same bread based food daily due to his limited like of the other options available." **Low-income single-parent a child with SEN**

"She is vegetarian and doesn't think there's much choice, but she's a very fussy eater anyway." **Parent of three children including one SEN**

"[There's] not a lot of variety for him as he has a allergy tray. He has to have half a jacket potato with no filling because that is all that's available for him." **Low-income single parent of one child with allergies**

"My daughter has a halal diet and she's not been happy with her school meals... there's not much variety and she says her portions are smaller." **Low-income parent of three halal and vegetarian children**

"The food is hot if he is eating in the canteen but if its a day where his mental health is affecting him then its tends to be warm or cold when its get the special needs room where he eats." **Low-income single-parent a child with SEN**

"My daughter goes to a Jewish school so gets kosher meals. However, the caterer is no longer working as they've gone bust. This means that they are only providing sandwiches." **Parent of one kosher child**



Financial impacts

Financial savings

The benefits of financial savings are widespread among parents. For some, it serves as a buffer, providing a welcomed reprieve from financial stress. However, for others, it goes beyond relief; it becomes a lifeline. One parent expressed an inability to provide packed lunches at all. Affordability for some becomes a driving force, and the preference for school meals stems from the cost-effectiveness they offer in comparison to daily packed lunches.

Dietary requirements

These financial savings take on heightened significance when catering to children with special dietary needs. A parent managing the dietary requirements of a kosher, celiac child, notes the substantial cost disparity in allergen-friendly foods—up to three times more expensive for staples like pasta or bread. At school, her child enjoys a favourite meal, pasta, without the added financial burden.

Impact on food budget

For some parents, the financial impact isn't confined to savings on packed lunch ingredients alone; it extends to their entire food budget. One parent has taken to provision of healthier and lighter evening meals in the knowledge that their children has had a hot meal at lunchtime. Another, who uses food banks, quantified weekly savings as £15 which they use for food at home instead.

Mental wellbeing

The positive impact extends beyond finances, fostering mental well-being as parents find relief from financial struggles, contributing to a positive and stress-free mindset.

“I prefer it if my kids had dinner every day as [it's] cheaper.” **Low-income single parent of two children**

“To be honest I don't think I could afford to provide packed lunch everyday.” **Low-income parent of one child with allergies**

“Free school meals save me time. But more importantly it's the save in money.” **Low-income parent of one child with allergies**

“So much easier if the kids have the free school meals as I'm a single parent cost of living hit us all hard . I could easily do £30 a week pack lunch bits.” **Low-income single parent of two children**

“It's saving a lot of money because allergen friendly food tends to be more expensive. I think it's about triple the price buying a gluten-free pack of pasta [...], thinking about bread it's the same. At least triple the price.” **Parent of four kosher children including on vegetarian**

“Things are tight at the moment, so having free school meals definitely takes the edge off it, and is one less thing to have to worry about. We are very happy about it.” **Parent of three children including one SEN**

“We find that we've taken to having a lighter evening meal as we know that there's been a hot meal at lunch time. This is cheaper for us, and healthier, as eating a big meal directly before bedtime isn't healthy.” **Parent of three children including one SEN**

“Not having to fund another meal has saved us money that can be used for other meals.” **Low-income parent of two children including one SEN**

“Without letting my daughter know too much of the adult issues, it's nice to be able to tell her that no child will go hungry and that we can save money this way.” **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

“Getting free school meal help both financially and mentally because in case if you are struggling financially than atleast you are free in mind about their school lunches.” **Low-income parent of a halal child**

“It is harder when he is off school as we have to provide him meals however when he is at school is easier as it does save us a fair amount of money.” **Low-income parent of one**

“It has helped in a major way as it takes the pressure and worry off me to think of how we can pay for lunches as they are covered at school.” **Low-income parent of two including one SEN**

“I don't have to find the money or products in foodbanks to provide a packed lunch and I have £15 a week to spend on food for the home instead of for at school. [...] . I can make meals that are healthy and i know he will eat them. This make me feel that I doing a much as his mum and that I am providing a healthy diet that's not processed and from tins.” **Low-income single-parent a child with SEN**

Evaluating trade offs

While the financial benefits of free school meals are evident, it's essential to acknowledge that a few parents and carers grapple with certain trade-offs.

Portions

For some, the key concern centres around smaller portions, as detailed in slide 16. This dilemma presents a choice between providing packed lunches for a satisfied child, sacrificing savings, or letting the child consume smaller portions to save money. One parent said that on days when their child has football training, they must provide a packed lunch to ensure that they are full.

Snacking

Another trade-off emerges from the consequence of small portions, leading to children returning home extra hungry and resorting to additional snacks, thereby incurring additional costs for parents.

Monitoring food intake

An additional challenge is the inability to monitor children's food intake, unlike with packed lunches where uneaten items are taken home. This lack of oversight poses a downside for parents. One parent expressed that despite a preference for packed lunches to address this concern, financial constraints make it an unaffordable option. Nevertheless, they appreciate the support of school meals.

"She does often have packed lunches because she's worried that she's not going to get enough but free school meals just saves us so much money." **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

"He's mentioned now that portions are quite small and he thinks that they've gotten smaller since everyone has [free school meals] now. On those days where he feels extra hungry, he'll come home and snack, snack snack which can be contradictory to the idea of a healthy lunch." **Low-income parent of two children including one SEN**

"My main concern is that portions are really small, so he comes out absolutely starving. If he has football training I'm having to take a packed lunch up for him anyway to keep them full." **Low-income single parent of two children**

"I originally had always planned on taking the opportunity to use free school meals until year 2 as financially it would be cost effective and I think if Leighton did not have a dairy allergy this would be what I would prefer to happen it is just because of the lack of choice and strict exclusions." **Low-income single parent of one child with allergies**

"I think I'd much prefer to give my daughter a home packed lunch for school as I know exactly what she has eaten and how much. But it's not affordable and a free meal is helpful so I can't even complain fully." **Low-income parent of three halal and vegetarian children**



Wellbeing

Time saved

Free school meals present advantages beyond financial considerations, notably impacting the time spent by parents and carers. However, for some, this convenience is balanced against the potential benefits of a packed lunch perceived as more nutritious, filling, or enjoyable.

Meal preparation for children often requires a significant investment of time and effort. A parent of two vegan children aptly expressed this challenge, acknowledging that while providing nutritious meals is essential, managing the associated time and effort is not always straightforward.

The time-saving benefits of school lunches are particularly noteworthy, offering a more convenient alternative to daily meal preparation. This is especially valuable for parents facing significant distances between home and school, as highlighted by a parent residing far from the school.

Although the amount of time saved may vary among parents, even a modest ten-minute reduction in morning routines is recognized as a meaningful benefit. This reduction contributes to easing the rush and pressure associated with the morning routine, contributing a smoother start to the day.

“I think taking the time to prepare good for the kids is essential, however the loss of time and the effort for make the food isn’t easy.” **Parent of two vegan children**

“It’s easier for me to give him school dinners but I am considering giving him a packed lunch so that he can have things he enjoys.” **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

“Having school lunches saves lots of time for me and quite convenient. I do prefer school meals because of the convenience.” **Low-income parent of a halal child**

“It most definitely saves me time in the morning especially as we live so far from school.” **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

“Yes, it saves me time, but literally about 10 minutes, so it's not really that big a deal.” **Low-income parent of one child**

“They definitely save rushing in the morning and the time it takes on a Sunday remembering to top up the fridge!” **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

What parents are doing with saved time

The introduction of Universal Free School Meals has reshaped morning routines for parents and carers, offering newfound time once dedicated to preparing packed lunches. This shift in daily tasks has resulted in various changes, both positive and nuanced.

For some families, it has facilitated shared breakfast moments, fostering meaningful family interactions and contributing to a generally positive morning mood. Parents are using the time saved for essential morning tasks, like organizing uniforms and bags, creating a more streamlined start to the day.

Moreover, for parents facing challenges such as depression, the extra time gained has a notable impact. It provides an extended period of morning rest, alleviating stressors associated with meal preparation and ensuring a more supportive start to the day.

Efficiency gains are particularly appreciated by parents with busy morning schedules, providing moments for additional rest and planning. The impact on family dynamics is noticeable, with shared breakfasts becoming a valued routine, including activities like braiding hair, enjoying breakfast, or catching an occasional cartoon.

However, it's important to recognize that managing school lunches, even with the convenience of UFSM, introduces new tasks, such as navigating the app to book school dinners. Despite these considerations, the overall sentiment is predominantly positive. Parents express gratitude for the reprieve from the stress associated with morning lunch preparations.

“It saves me time and money having free school meals which allows me to have breakfast with my children in the morning rather than making a packed lunch.”
Low-income parent of two children including one SEN

“Definitely saves time. It gives me time to get their uniform and bags ready for the day, as well as giving me time to get ready before walking to school.” Parent of two children

“My mood is more positive because I have more time to actually make my kids breakfast rather than a packed lunch.” Low-income single parent of two children

“They definitely save time as morning time gets very busy i get more time to sleep as well which gives me more energetic start of the day.” Low-income parent of a halal child

I get an extra 10 mins in bed to just think and plan my day ahead without having to worry about packed lunches Low-income parent of three halal and vegetarian children

It has [definitely] given us more time together at breakfast as a family and just enjoy a breakfast and plait hair before school and even get the odd cartoon on too. So it has been really lovely.” Low-income parent of three halal and vegetarian children

“It definitely saves time in the morning if they have school lunches as then it's one less thing to worry about in the morning so this time could be spent with my children getting them ready, chatting to them etc. Not having this stress in the morning does have a positive impact on the start of my day. However it may save time in the morning but I still have to spend time going on the app to book their school dinners which can also be time consuming.” Low-income parent of two including one SEN

“Free school meals do save me time and it has positive impact on me daily. I have severe depression and struggle to sleep and plan so not having to prepare a lunch daily we have a bit longer to sleep in the morning and I dont have to worry that he will go without if I can't operate and complete basic functions like shopping or making a meal.” Low-income single-parent a child with SEN

Impacts on stress and wellbeing

Parents and carers consistently highlight the notable impact in reducing daily stress associated with meal preparation, offering a positive influence on overall wellbeing and mental health.

Dietary needs simplified

For parents of children with specific dietary needs, such as celiac disease and dairy intolerance, school meals serve as a practical solution, sparing parents the potential complexities of meal planning and crafting specialised packed lunches.

Streamlining lunch prep

Families with multiple children experience substantial relief from the daily lunch-making ritual. The convenience of school meals addresses the stressful nature of daily lunch preparations, providing a welcome break from this routine.

Less stressful mornings

The morning routine benefits significantly from the absence of lunch preparations. Parents express the relief of avoiding the chaos of rushed mornings, particularly impactful for families dealing with unique challenges, such as special educational needs. The resulting reduction in stress contributes to a more positive start to the day and an improved overall mood, reflecting positively on mental wellbeing.

Reducing mental load

The assurance that children receive a full, nutritious meal at lunchtime diminishes the mental load on parents. This not only positively impacts mental wellbeing but also reduces worries about meeting children's nutritional needs.

“There’s an easiness to school dinners where you book it and don’t have to stress in the morning.” **Low-income parent of two including one SEN**

“[My eldest daughter] is celiac and my youngest daughter can’t eat dairy. It would be a minefield if I had to make lunches.” **Parent of four kosher children including on vegetarian**

“It’s a massive help that it’s one less thing I need to worry about on a regular basis” **Parent of four kosher children including on vegetarian**

“As a parent of multiple children [...] the fact I don’t need to make lunches every day is a massive, massive weight off of my back” **Parent of four kosher children including on vegetarian**

“I would be incredibly stressed if I had to buy stuff every day to make the meals, and I know that because I do it during the holidays and it is a massive stress.” **Parent of four kosher children including on vegetarian**

“I have four children so not needing to worry about making lunches every day gives me more times to spend with my kids and just helps me feel more relaxed that it’s not another thing to worry about and remember.” **Parent of four kosher children including on vegetarian**

“It takes the pressure off the morning rush to get them out of the door before school. We use the time to have a less-stressful start to the day, which is therefore a positive impact on day and mood.” **Parent of three children including one SEN**

“Trying to rush and make sure everything is ready in the morning can be quite chaotic. As he is special needs things are not always to plan or the same each day. So adding in making a packed lunch if he having a meltdown can be hard.” **Low-income parent of five children including one SEN**

“It’s one less thing to worry about, reducing the mental load [...] that our daughters are eating a full meal at lunch, and not going hungry.” **Parent of two children**

“It also takes one thing off my list which makes me less stressed on the morning.” **Low-income parent of two children including one SEN**

“Honestly it’s one less thing to worry about. Not having to think about where the money or time is coming from is a nice relief.” **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

Impacts of pupil experience on wellbeing: the pros

Parents observe varied wellbeing benefits for their children due to the implementation of UFSM, broadly fostering a positive environment and encouraging positive behaviours. A summary of these can be found below.

Inclusion and socialisation

For many children, the communal aspect of school meals contributes to a sense of inclusion. It provides an opportunity for friends to gather and share a meal together, creating a positive social environment. As one parent notes, the ability for friends to sit together enhances the overall experience.

Sense of equality

Parents highlight that their children enjoy the sense of inclusion and equality that comes with sitting down to the same meal. It fosters a sense of togetherness, reducing any feelings of exclusion. This inclusivity is particularly important for children's emotional well-being.

Support for special education needs

Children with specific needs, such as autism, benefit greatly from the structure provided by school meals. The nurturing environment of a cooked lunch in a family-style setting can be a great encouragement, making mealtimes more manageable for children who may struggle.

Improvement in table manners

UFSM contributes positively to children's development, including improvements in table manners and cutlery usage. These essential life skills are enhanced by the shared experience of eating together.

Communication and independence

The shared meals encourage communication among children, providing an opportunity to discuss their thoughts on the food. This practice builds strong communication skills and encourages independence as they learn to make choices about their meals.

Developing healthy eating habits

School meals exposes children to a variety of foods, promoting discussions about nutrition and the importance of different food groups. As one parent noted, this encouraged her children to develop healthy eating habits and a better understanding of food choices.

“A lot of her friends have [free school meals] as well so it’s nice for them to be able to sit together and eat.” **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

“My son enjoys free school meals predominantly because he’s included with all his friends and enjoys having the experience of sitting down and having the same meal. He doesn’t feel left out.” **Low-income parent of one**

“My daughter has benefitted from eating school meals greatly. She is autistic and struggles greatly at mealtimes so having a cooked lunch on the school's nurture table and eating in a ‘family style’ setting is a great encouragement.” **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

“I think his table manners and ability to use cutlery has improved.” **Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN**

“My child experience with eating everyone and same food and sharing their thoughts together build strong communication skills between kids.” **Low-income parent of a halal child**

“Another impact is talking to my kids and them understanding the variety of foods available to them and which ones are good and which ones are not so good. Talking about what they had opens a conversation on what they like, dislike, the importance of certain food groups. It encourages them to have independence in choosing foods but also knowledge.” **Low-income parent of two including one SEN**

Impacts of pupil experience on wellbeing: the cons

The pupil experience of free school meals presents challenges, particularly concerning time constraints and rushed lunches, which may impact how children engage with and perceive their mealtime experience. It is essential to recognise that while this is the majority view, other parents disagree emphasising well managed traffic flow and a general positive experience.

Time constraints and rushed lunches

Some parents express concerns regarding the limited time allocated for lunch, especially in schools with smaller canteens. This can lead to children feeling rushed during their meals.

Varied responses

While some children adeptly adapt to the time constraints, eating quickly without complaints, others may opt out of free meals due to perceived inconveniences associated with the process. One child opted out citing queues as an issue.

Differing opinions on time allocation

Opinions on whether children receive enough time to eat vary among parents. While some acknowledge that their children have ample time, others highlight instances where slow eaters may have to leave the lunch hall before finishing.

“My lunch was delicious. I was rushed because there was only a few minutes to eat.”
Low-income single parent of one child with allergies

“Lunch is rushed, and this is an issue where the canteen is too small to cater for all the children, and so it is broken down into two sessions across different tmyear groups. However this after COVID, they extended lunch by 10mins to cater for this. Kids still feel rushed.” Parent of two halal and disabled children

“I personally don’t think they get long enough to eat as my son says dinner ladies tell them to hurry up so that the next year group can eat.” Low-income single parent of two children

“[My child] eats extremely quickly in general so she’s never complained about not having enough time! She’s sits happily with her friends to eat and is always comfortable where she’s sitting to eat.” [Parent of four kosher children including on vegetarian]

“The cafeteria is busy but he always has time to eat. If he leaves food, it’s because he’s rushing off to play football.” Parent of three children including one SEN

“One of my children won’t have free meals even though she’s entitled to them because she hates queuing up to get them. It takes too long and she doesn’t get enough time to eat.” Low-income parent of one child

“The girls enjoy lunch time. There is good options of menu which they generally enjoy and the traffic flow is well managed by the staff. They have plenty of time to eat, as well as time to play with their friends.” Parent of two children

“Every lunch time Leighton complains about being rushed, he says he is told he has one minute left to eat because they need to get another year group in.” Low-income single parent of one child with allergies

“A lot of her friends have [free school meals] as well so it’s nice for them to able to sit together and eat.” Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN

“The kids gave more than enough time to eat and there’s always enough space for every child to sit comfortably.” Low-income single parent of two children including one SEN

“The children do get enough time to eat. However, my daughter is a very slow eater so often has to leave the lunch hall before finishing.” Parent of one kosher child

“My children always said they never had enough time to eat their lunch but would want to follow their friends outside to play.” Low-income parent of two including one SEN



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