

**Proposed eligibility criteria for free school meals**

**1 Do you agree with our proposed net earnings threshold to determine eligibility for free school meals and the early years pupil premium under Universal Credit?**

**Sustain Response:** No

**Comments :**

1. We believe that if a family is deserving of Universal Credit, then they should be eligible for free school meals, as such we do not agree with the introduction of an earnings threshold of £7,400 to determine eligibility for free school meals under Universal Credit. Research by the Children's Society estimates that a million children in poverty will miss out on a free school meal under this proposal.

**Tackling food poverty**

2. Sadly almost a third of children in the UK are living in poverty, and many have a poor diet as a result (Child Poverty Action Group - <http://www.cpag.org.uk/>), Sustain's work on reducing food poverty i.e. a person's inability to access sufficient healthy affordable food, has found that set against a rise in numbers struggling in food poverty (Trussell Trust [www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/mid-year-stats/](http://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/mid-year-stats/)), increasing eligibility and uptake of free school meals is one of the most effective methods that this country has to meaningfully impact on this problem, particularly for children whose predicament – and the impact this may have on their health, well-being, educational attainment and life chances - is not within their power to improve.

3. Worth over £400 a year per child, free school meals can represent a substantial proportion of a struggling family's income (Department of Education <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/free-school-lunch-for-every-child-in-infant-school>). For those just above the threshold of £7400 earnings (besides benefits), this constitutes a very significant extra cost that may act as a deterrent to earn more, and may in some cases lead to some actively working less.

**Improving diets and attainment**

4. But the problem is greater than just an ability to eat enough, as fundamental as this is, but for many it is about access to a nutritious diet. The UK has one of the worst childhood obesity rates globally, and the NHS estimates that £16million is spent dealing with diet related disease, including diabetes and dental care (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/07/more-spent-on-treating-obesity-related-conditions-than-on-the-po/>), with the costs of diet related illness to society in the billions.

5. Much work has been put into improving the food served in schools over the last decade, so much so that for many, and particularly those on a low income, school lunch constitutes the main opportunity in the day for a nutritious meal, with three quarters of teachers reporting children arriving at school too hungry to learn (NASUWT - <https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/uploads/assets/uploaded/e8a0b4a6-dfac-4f88-bdef913fc6d0084c.pdf>).

6. Sadly, the alternative of packed lunch has been shown to fall short, with only 1% meeting nutritional standards [University of Leeds <https://www.leeds.ac.uk/news/article/683/>], and with those children eating a school lunch having a healthier diet overall (Leeds Beckett -

<http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/3308/1/impact-of-school-lunch-type-on-nutritional-quality-of-english-children-s-diets.pdf>).

7. It makes sense even from a purely economic perspective and particularly for taxpayers, to spend the extra up front on providing better school meals, and save a larger bill in health care costs further down the line.

8. The impact of eating well in the day goes further than just health, with research showing that better diets in schools improve attainment (Department for Education - [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/184047/DFE-RR227.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/184047/DFE-RR227.pdf)).

9. Many of those in poverty but not eligible for free school meals simply cannot afford anything other than a packed lunch, and are put at a disadvantage to their peers with a healthier diet. There is evidence that eating a healthy school meal improves concentration and classroom behaviour (Department for Education <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/free-school-lunch-for-every-child-in-infant-school> ), with a poll showing a third of children have had trouble paying attention at school due to hunger (IPSOS MORI - <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/child-hunger-london> ).

10. Other studies have demonstrated that improved school meals reduced sickness absences and led to better results in English, Maths and Science (Institute for Fiscal Studies <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/6278> and Children's Society <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/publications-library/fair-and-square-policy-report-future-free> ).

#### Support for increased eligibility

11. We put this question to the Parents' Jury that Sustain administers, and which has around 400 members (with a rolling recruitment process). 89% of the 141 parents who responded were in favour of all children in families receiving Universal Credit being eligible for Free School Meals, compared with 3% in favour of the Government's current proposal.

The Parents' Jury aims to give parents a stronger voice on the food available and promoted in their children's schools, in shops, on the high street, and beyond. Jury members are sent regular online surveys, and given ad hoc opportunities to comment on topical news, adverts and policy announcements. Members come from all parts of Great Britain; and so far most are between 25-54 years old and 85% are women. The Jury is open to any parent in the UK with a child under 18 years of age. [www.parentsjury.net](http://www.parentsjury.net)

The survey which produced the findings on school food is due to be published early in 2018, and was circulated in November 2017. 141 members responded to the survey. The question and findings are listed below.

Q: Should all school-age children in households living in poverty be entitled to receive Free School Meals (FSMs)?

1*	2	3	4	5	Total:
8	4	3	125	1	141

\* explanation:

1. Don't know enough about this issue
2. No but ensure an extra 50,000 kids 'most in need' are entitled to FSMs

3. No, keep the number of eligible children the same as now
4. Yes, extend provision so all children living in poverty are entitled to FSMs
5. Undecided

### **Protecting entitlements for free school meals**

**2 Do you agree with our intention to protect those pupils who would otherwise lose their entitlement to free school meals, and those children who would otherwise lose their entitlement to the early years' pupil premium, under the new eligibility criteria?**

**Sustain's Response:** Yes

**Comments:**

Whilst we believe that no children currently eligible should lose out, there will still need to be a transition to the new system, and we agree that the current plans for the transition period from one system to another is fair. It will be key that these changes are effectively communicated to those affected – particularly with harder to reach communities.

### **Supporting families and local delivery**

**3 Do you feel that the proposals in this consultation may adversely affect any children who share one or more of the relevant protected characteristics outlined in the Equality Act 2010?**

**Comments:**

In response to points 5.7 and 5.8 in the consultation document – regarding uptake of free school meals, we believe more could be done to increase free school meal uptake. The withdrawal of funding to encourage this across England is regrettable, and if the Government is serious about increasing uptake, this support should be reinstated or alternative initiatives should be introduced to address this.

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