



**More Than a Meal:**  
**The Real Impact of**  
**Free School Meals**





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# Christina's foreword

Can you imagine being told to put your food back because there is not enough money on your card? Can you imagine looking at a room of food, knowing that you cannot afford it? Can you imagine trying to concentrate in class when you've not had the healthy food you need?

Every child deserves a decent, nutritious meal at lunchtime, and a fun and carefree day at school. But right now, around 800,000 children living in poverty don't qualify for free school meals, even as the cost of living soars. For these students, lunchtimes are a horrible experience.

Without good food, it's harder for us to stay healthy, concentrate in school, and perform in our exams – even when we're working our absolute hardest. It's not fair that so many young people are put in this position.

Free school meals is a policy that is all about young people – yet our voices are often excluded from the discussion. With this report we want to provide insight into the lives of young people who have experiences of free school meals, and those that really need access, but sadly don't meet the hugely restrictive criteria.

Read on to find out why free school meals are more than just a meal for so many young people.

## Christina

### **Christina Adane**

Campaigner in Residence, Bite Back 2030



Christina is 18 years old, and led Bite Back 2030's campaign to extend free school meals into the holidays during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. Passionate about tackling food injustice and the climate crisis, her work has been recognised by the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, who welcomed Christina as a guest on their podcast, and by the BBC, who named her in their most inspiring 100 women of 2020. In 2021, she won the Diana Legacy Award for her efforts with Bite Back in fighting for a fairer food system.

# Executive summary

**School is the only place where we can make absolutely certain all children in need are getting a decent, nutritious meal, no matter what their circumstances are.**

Young people spend around 190 days of the year in school. The food they eat there has an impact on both their health and wellbeing as well their performance. That's why, since 1944, governments have played an active role in providing access to nutritious free lunch to the children who need it most.

But they are also much more than a meal. Free school meals provide vital access to nutritious food for children experiencing food insecurity.<sup>1</sup> Studies show that food insecure children are more likely to have mental health problems, mood disorders and anxiety disorders; and are more likely to suffer from poor health and hospitalisations than food secure children.<sup>2</sup> Free school meals have been shown to significantly improve attendance<sup>3</sup> and educational outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

Right now the eligibility criteria to receive a free school meal in England is extremely low, and has remained static while the cost of living has soared, resulting in **800,000 school age children in England living in poverty, but not being 'poor' enough to qualify for free school meals.**<sup>5</sup> This shouldn't be happening – every child deserves access to healthy, delicious food all year round.

And it is especially worrying as the cost of living crisis plunges more families into poverty. In July 2022, UK inflation hit a new high, rising above 10% for the first time since the 1980s with soaring food prices driving it up. When family budgets are tight and financial pressures build, food is often the first thing that gets cut. School meals provide a safety net for children, guaranteeing them a nutritious meal for 190 days of the year. Extending free school meals to the children most in need will make a huge difference to their struggling families and will also help protect their health.

**As the cost of living crisis worsens and puts more children at risk of food poverty, the Government must urgently take action by extending eligibility for free school meals to all children from families in receipt of universal credit, or equivalent benefits.**

<sup>1</sup> Food Foundation (2021), Peas Please Progress Report, <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/2021-peas-please-progress-report>

<sup>2</sup> Food Foundation (2022), Children Missing Out on Free School Meals, <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/news/children-missing-out-free-school-meals>

<sup>3</sup> Kitchen S, Tanner E, Brown V et al (2012) Evaluation of the Free School Meals Pilot. Impact Report. National Centre for Social Research Ref: DFE-RR227. ISBN: 978-1-78105-124-5.

<sup>4</sup> Institute for Social and Economic Research (2009), Healthy School Meals and Educational Outcomes <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/research/publications/working-papers/iser/2009-01.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Child Poverty Action Group (2022) 800,000 Children In Poverty Not Getting Free School Meals <https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/800000-children-poverty-not-getting-free-school-meals>

At Bite Back 2030, we work to bring the lived experience of young people aged 14–18 to the fore. We have talked to young people, a head teacher and parents, about their experiences of free school meals and the cost of living crisis.

**Read on for the complete collection of youth insights.**

## What we've heard from young people

We heard stories of young people turning to local fast food outlets for cheaper – but unhealthy – alternatives to school food; putting their heads on the table from hunger and exhaustion; friends giving away their own food to their peers; and more. We also heard stories about the benefits of receiving free school meals, including improved concentration and overall well being. The young people also shared insights for how the free school meal system can be further improved, to ensure stigma plays no part in a pupil's school food experience, and to remove other barriers to uptake.

These were not easy stories to share, or to listen to. But it's really important that they are heard.

“ I have many friends who need and deserve free school meals but they don't receive it. I think having this discussion and being a voice for people like me and my friends was a great opportunity. Even though I was choking up at times, I thought it was an interesting and liberating discussion.”

**17-year-old**

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Over summer 2022, members of the Bite Back Youth Board facilitated 60 minute conversations with young people, aged 15 to 18, from across England, with safeguarding support from staff members. The group included young people who are not eligible for free school meals, as well as from young people who do receive free school meals. The virtual sessions were recorded for note-taking purposes, but the quotes shared have been anonymised.

## Free school meals improve pupils' access to healthier food, and improve their wellbeing both in and out of school

“ I have seen an amazing difference in my concentration and my activeness all together. ”  
**16 year-old, on receiving free school meals**

“ My friend wasn't eligible for free school meals in primary, but he became eligible in secondary and he told me he used to worry about eating when he was in primary school. With free school meals, people can go into school not worrying about food or learning. ”

**18-year-old**

“ My friend frequently talked about how much they would struggle to eat, three to five times a week they didn't have lunch and went hungry. It would get them down the rest of the day and it definitely impacted how they worked at school, and that's wrong. ”

**16-year-old**

“ I think free school meals are really helpful. If I was in the situation of not being able to access free school meals, I wouldn't know what to do. ”

**16-year-old**

“ During exams, I was eating a lot of unhealthy food and drinking energy drinks because it was cheaper and easier than getting a full meal [at school]. I think this affected my performance. ”

**16-year-old**

“ My twin brother forgot his water bottle and couldn't afford to buy a bottle at lunch, which meant he didn't have water for the day and we had exams, so felt like he didn't perform as well. ”

**15-year-old**

“ Food has a direct link with performance at school. The Government is continuing with its 'levelling up' agenda (whatever that means) so free school meals should be a big part of this. ”

**18-year-old**

“ By the end of the day you could visibly see who hadn't eaten. They sat at the back of the classroom so they wouldn't get shouted out for lying their head on the table. ”

**17-year-old**

## Lack of access to free school meals is a huge and unfair burden for young people to shoulder

“ A couple of friends have single-parent households but they didn’t receive free school meals. I asked my friend why aren’t you having lunch, and she said because she can’t afford it, and she was really stressed about it. It left an impression on me. She’d have to go hungry until she went home.”

17-year-old

“ I had a close friend who shared their family situation where I could see the detrimental effects of not having free school meals. Her mum was going through chemotherapy and having issues with paychecks. Her older brother was going to university and got a job to help provide. She felt so stressed out that she stopped buying school food and just brought in a cheap nut bar.”

16-year-old

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

15-year-old

### In the absence of free school meals, young people turn to cheaper, unhealthy options

“ A lot of my friends will skip a school dinner because it’s too expensive and wait to get chicken and chips from the local shop as it’s so much cheaper.”

15-year-old

“ There have been notable moments where break snacks were people’s only meal until they got home five hours later. At times I gave up my snacks for other people.”

16-year-old

## Things are getting worse in the cost of living crisis

“ Expanding eligibility would definitely be important because there are students at my school who get help from the school with their uniform or school trips, but still aren’t eligible for free school meals. You’ll see them at lunch not being able to afford their food or you’ll see them going up to the counter asking to pay it back. I see this a lot at my school. You now get green slips when you can’t afford the food that you’ve asked for which you’re expected to pay back, I’m seeing an increasing number of students who are having to do that on a weekly basis.”

15-year-old

“ As a teenager when I go food shopping with my mum I do notice the differences, for example with the quantity and even quality. Things have to be really thought about, there's not as much food in the house as before.” **16-year-old**

“ I went shopping with my granddad, just to last a week. We're a household of four and set myself a budget of £30 which I know should be enough because I've been shopping with my mum before. But the shop ended up costing more than £60, even though I was only buying staples.”  
**16-year-old**

## The free school meals system has become less stigmatising...

“ A lot of people at my school receive free school meals, so it was normal and there was no stigma. It was worse when I was younger, people would say you should be able to pay for your own food.”  
**16-year-old**

“ In Year 6 they gave us some forms and encouraged us to apply, regardless of whether we thought we'd be eligible.”  
**16-year-old**

“ It stopped bothering me because now we have biometrics, which means people can't see you get free school meals. People used to make a massive fuss that I used to have this little slip and say, 'you're so lucky you don't have to pay for anything'.”  
**15-year-old**

“ In my school you can't tell who receives free school meals because of the card system.”  
**16-year-old**

## ...but there's still a long way to go to improve the experience and uptake

“ Growing up, I was always embarrassed about receiving free school meals. Schools with poor admin make it difficult to get free school meals and make it an embarrassing experience. The situation in my school was that you basically had to beg for free school meals, send a tonne of emails. Admin is a really big part of free school meals.” **17-year-old**

“ To access you need to have internet access which lots of people don't have.” **18-year-old**

“ We didn't go through the school either. A friend found it really hard to apply, their mum was disabled, it cost money to access a library to apply. They found it really stressful and felt like they were made to feel greedy.” **16-year-old**

“ On half days they come in with a paper bag, which has a sandwich and piece of fruit. I think it's the most mortifying experience I've ever had because they make it incredibly obvious that you can't afford your lunch. They bring it into class and you have to collect it.”  
**15-year-old**



# A precarious lifeline – Victor's story

Hi, my name is Victor or my friends call me Timi, I'm 15 years old and I'm from South East London. I'm from a relatively low-income family – it's just my mum looking after four children. Food security has always been a struggle for me. I've been on free school meals for large periods of time during primary school and my family has made use of foodbanks in the past.

Right now, my mum pays for my lunches. Lunch times are always a struggle for me. I have a very limited amount of money to spend each day so I can really only get one item. Sometimes I'm forced to take certain measures to ensure I'm able to eat. Every other Wednesday, school closes at 2pm which is right after lunchtime and so instead of buying something to eat at school, where a standard meal costs £2.40, it's way more affordable for me to go to one of the many shops on the colloquially named "Dover" where I can buy a box of chips and two wings for £1. I can even add on a 29p can of fizzy drink and maybe a pack of crisps or even a full bag of Haribo for less than I would spend at school.

This leads to me and hundreds – and I mean hundreds – of other students eating unhealthy food, contributing to poor health amongst children in London. Chicken shops are taking advantage of this and opening up on Dover and elsewhere, offering after-school discount deals like two wings and chips for £1 and a half price fillet burger meal.

When I do buy food from the school canteen, I often have little option but to buy something cheap in order to save money. I can pick up a doughnut for £1.20 and hope that it will get me through the rest of the day, saving a whole 70p which within a few days would buy me a whole meal. You can see how not having access to free school meals makes it difficult to access healthy food at school.

Buying cheap, unhealthy foods like doughnuts does not get you through the school day, and can cause you to feel hungry which will affect your concentration and ultimately your learning outcomes. Being hungry and not having the right nutrients can also make you more irritable and damage relationships with those at school, including with teachers. For example, English is normally after lunch for me but since sometimes I don't eat properly it leads to me feeling tired during lessons and I don't get much work done. I get distracted easier and that has led to the relationship with my teacher worsening.



If I had full and definite access to free school meals then it would save money, for our family allowing us to eat more healthy and nutritious food. It would also improve various other aspects of my life too, such as being able to be with friends in the canteen, and improving my performance in lessons.

**Victor, aged 15**

# The headteacher's view - lack of nutrition undermines efforts to tackle inequalities

By Dr Nick Capstick OBE,

CEO of the White Horse Federation multi-academy trust and chair of the School Food Review Working Group

The role of Headteacher is always an exciting one with a prominent level of continual change and an infinite variety of new challenges daily. There is never a dull moment, it's fantastic on every level.

This year however, more than any other time in my 37 years of teaching, the excitement of being a Headteacher is tinged with an overwhelming fear that the last few months, might not have been as kind to some of our most vulnerable children and their families as they may have wanted.

All our parents and families are hardworking and caring who are dedicated to the well-being of their children but this summer, more than any other, circumstances beyond their control have brought a rare and distinctive harshness to their lives. Inflation soaring, the cost of food increasing daily, spiralling fuel costs have brought untold pressures on those families who even in the best of times struggle to make ends meet.

Already, I have heard of one parent who for the first time in her life has resorted to shoplifting not for luxuries but for basic, supermarket home brand foods which when amounting to less than £4.50.

Meanwhile in our school dinner halls we have had instances of children coming in with just a small yoghurt or two solitary rashers of bacon in their lunchboxes. **It is hard to forget the sight of a child pretending to eat from an empty lunchbox.**

**These are not isolated cases.** Parents on limited incomes struggle to feed their children, look after their health, and keep them warm at night. With the cost of living continually rising and wages not equalling the same levels as weekly price increases, **we need to look again at eligibility for free school meals.**

Every school day we see the benefits free school meals provide to those currently entitled. For many it is the only hot, nutritious meal they have in a day. A quality school meal helps improve children's concentration and behaviour during lessons. We witness, first-hand, the effect they can have on improving school attendance, on children's health, and academic performance.

We live in the uncertainty of not knowing where inflation is leading us and when, if ever, we will see the long awaited "levelling up" agenda actually having an impact. This creates food insecurity often leading to food poverty in many homes in increasing numbers and for many more children. By providing a healthy, well balanced, and nutritious meal for children most in need, we can at least guarantee that for a majority of the week no child will feel the constant despair of hunger or the insecurity of knowing where their next meal might come from.

And so, as a serving Headteacher I am left wondering not just about how much I love the variety of my job but also the challenges we are likely to meet because of food poverty or insecurity over the next year. Furthermore, I am left to think about the cost which might be done both physically and psychologically to our children and families who often for the first time in their lives now know what it is like to be properly hungry, who understand the misery of food and fuel insecurity and the damage both do to the lives of parents and children living in or just above the benefits system.

**We must make sure that every child has the nutrition they need to be able to learn and do well.** Not doing so would undermine all the great efforts of the education workforce to tackle inequalities and will **fail a generation of children who deserve better.**

## The evidence for free school meals

### 1. School meals can boost educational attainment and attendance

A growing body of evidence<sup>6</sup>, alongside testimony directly from young people, shows that the provision of nutritious food can have a positive impact on children's ability to perform in school. In one study, **increased access to healthy school lunches led to a significant number of pupils gaining higher test scores in English and Science, while also substantially reducing absences that are more likely due to sickness.**<sup>7</sup>

Pilot studies of universal free school meals in the UK showed:<sup>8,9</sup>

- Pupils made between four and eight weeks' more progress than expected.
- 23% increase in the number of children eating vegetables at lunchtime.
- The number of children consuming crisps and soft drinks reduced by 18%.
- A saving of over £400 per family per year.

## 2. Too many children are missing out

The UK is currently facing the worst cost of living crisis in 40 years. Poverty and lack of access to healthy food is also rising, with an estimated **2.6 million children living in households that missed meals or struggled to access healthy food during April 2022**.<sup>10</sup> Studies show that food insecure children are more likely to have mental health problems, mood disorders and anxiety disorders; and are more likely to suffer from poor health and hospitalisations than food secure children.<sup>11</sup>

The eligibility criteria to receive a free school meal in England is extremely narrow, resulting in hundreds of thousands of children who live in poverty not qualifying. In England, all children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 receive free school meals. However, from Year 3 onwards, only children living in households with an annual household income that does not exceed £7,400 after tax are eligible. This low threshold has remained static while the cost of living has soared, resulting in an estimated **800,000 school age children in England living in poverty, but not being 'poor' enough to qualify for free school meals**.<sup>12</sup>

## 3. Extending provision is popular with the public

One of the largest surveys ever conducted on school meal provision has found that **if the Government were to increase funding for education, 68% of parents, grandparents and carers think it should be spent on school meals**.<sup>13</sup> Three quarters of UK adults agree that the Government must step in for children whose parents are unable to feed them, while 9 in 10 agree that every child has the right to have a healthy meal at least once a day.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Cohen, J., Hecht, A. A., McLoughlin, G. M., et al (2021). Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review. *Nutrients*, 13(3), 911. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu13030911>

<sup>7</sup> Institute for Social and Economic Research (2009) Healthy School Meals and Educational Outcomes, <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/research/publications/working-papers/iser/2009-01.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Department of Education (2012) Evaluation of the Free School Meals Pilot - Impact Report, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-the-free-school-meals-pilot-impact-report>

<sup>9</sup> Dimbleby, H., Vincent, J. (2013) The School Food Plan, [http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/School\\_Food\\_Plan\\_2013.pdf](http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/School_Food_Plan_2013.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Food Foundation (2022) Food Insecurity Tracking, <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking>

<sup>11</sup> Food Foundation (2022), Children Missing Out on Free School Meals, <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/news/children-missing-out-free-school-meals>

<sup>12</sup> Child Poverty Action Group (2022) 800,000 Children In Poverty Not Getting Free School Meals, <https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/800000-children-poverty-not-getting-free-school-meals>

<sup>13</sup> ParentPay, Cypad and LACA(2022) School Meals Report, <https://laca.co.uk/sites/default/files/attachment/news/ParentPay%20School%20Meal%20Report%2006.22%20%28JON%29.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Food Standards Agency and Demos (2021) Food in a Pandemic, <https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/fsa-food-in-a-pandemic-march-2021.pdf>

# The parents' perspective

- My son wants proper cooked food, he doesn't want pizza. When he's at school, I know he will be well fed; at home I'm not able to provide his 5-a-day. The government tells us to eat healthily and that obesity has to go down. But it's cheaper to buy a frozen pizza than it is to buy fruit and veg. At the [supermarket] till if people don't have enough money to pay the bill, they'll put back the fruit and veg because it's the other stuff that goes further. ■
- Free school meals mean that my kids have something different to eat at school every day, and they get the salad bar, and they'll get a piece of fruit or some fruit juice. And the dinner ladies are great, they know my child. ■
- My children see some of their friends getting a proper meal at school and they wonder how come they are different, why can't they get the same. Free school meals also take away a huge amount of worry for parents. We spend a lot of time thinking about what to feed our kids, when to make their packed lunch... ■
- My children go into school in the morning feeling motivated, they want to do well. But by the end of the day they're flagging, because without access to free school meals they're not getting the right nutrition. ■
- The last month for our household has been a nightmare. My cupboards are bare. It was really tough during the holidays because my children weren't getting their school meal. ■
- My son put £10 of his own money on his lunch card because he didn't want me as his mother to worry about it. It's not fair on him. ■
- I am finding myself going to different places for different products to find the best deals. I'm always in the discount areas. In Sainsbury's after 7 pm everything goes down to a quarter of the price. I'm also using the food bank more often. ■
- I use the food bank every Tuesday and that influences what I buy later at the shop, which is really only for my children. I find myself being able to buy only small bits instead of ingredients for proper meals. It's a really sad situation for everyone. Without the food bank I would be completely lost. I know people who are really struggling. ■
- I'm a single parent but I feel for the parents who are working who are stuck in the gap. There's a grey area where people aren't earning enough to eat but earning too much to get help. ■
- I can't afford to cook for my children in the evening, so I make them a sandwich. I've just eaten this sandwich that's been provided here and that's it for me for the day. In the evening I'll just have a cup of tea. ■
- Children are having to learn to budget. And they're learning that unhealthier options are cheaper. My 5-year-old asked for an Eton Mess. I had to explain that I can afford the whipped cream, but not the strawberries. ■

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In September 2022, we also spoke with parents and families living in the South of England to hear about their experiences of free school meals and the cost of living crisis. We are very grateful to them for sharing their stories, and thank you to Tom and the team at the Good Company for helping to arrange the discussion. Good Company (Surrey) is a local anti-poverty charity that runs five food bank centres in Epsom and the surrounding area.

# Call to action

Healthy free school meals are a simple and effective way to provide at least one nutritious meal a day to young people growing up in low income households. Free school meal provision delivers multiple additional benefits – including improved attendance, concentration and attainment – helping to improve the quality of life of young people overall.

As the cost of living crisis worsens and puts more children at risk of food poverty, **the Government must urgently take action by extending eligibility for free school meals to all children from families in receipt of universal credit, or equivalent benefits.**

# About Bite Back 2030

Bite Back 2030 is a youth-led movement working to transform the food system to put child health first. That means healthy schools, healthy screens and healthy streets for every child, no matter where they live. It's a stark and damning fact that by the age of just 11, as they leave primary school, the health of one in three children is now at risk from the food they eat. Together we want to change this.

Our young people are campaigning for change across England. 80 young people are now part of our national and local Youth Boards in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds and Sheffield. Almost 3,000 young people are participating across our School Food Champions and Community Food Champions programmes this year. And we keep getting bigger.

Follow us @biteback2030  
[www.biteback2030.com](http://www.biteback2030.com)

