

2025 School Meals Report

Understanding the UK school meals
landscape: a parent's perspective



Published July 2025 by ParentPay Group.



In partnership with LACA – The School Food People

LACA is the leading representative body of professional catering managers and chefs working in the school sector across local authorities, private contractors and individual schools and academies.

LACA is focused on developing, representing, and supporting its members through a range of initiatives and services which include:

- campaigning and lobbying industry and government to improve the school food service
- national and regional events and networking opportunities including the annual LACA Main Event
- learning and development tools and support including allergen risk assessment guides, menu checking services and e-learning courses.

To ensure every child has access to a hot, nutritious meal each day, it is essential that appropriate funding is in place. For many children, this may be their only meal of the day. The data provided by ParentPay Group plays a vital role in supporting LACA's efforts to highlight the challenges facing the industry and advocate for necessary support.

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Foreword

Understanding parents' views, behaviours and experiences is critical to identifying the barriers that restrict wider uptake of school meals and introducing informed measures to overcome them. Trusted by over 4 million parents, we've harnessed our unique platform to lift the lid on what parents really think and feel about key aspects of school meal provision – from school meals vs packed lunches, allergen management and Free School Meal eligibility and usage to meal selection, booking and payment preferences and more.

With an incredible 236,706 parents engaging with our research, the findings contained in the 2025 School Meals Report offer a large-scale, deep dive into the current 'state of the nation' when it comes to school meals provision across the UK.

Partnering once again with LACA, and including expert commentary from a range of industry thought leaders, the 2025 School Meals Report provides schools and education catering providers with the opportunity to see their service through the eyes of parents. It also serves as a springboard to empower meaningful, data-driven change that can optimise services, increase uptake and support more children to thrive through the provision of high-quality school meals.

With special thanks to our expert commentators: Tanya Ednan-Laperouse OBE, Cath Holmes, Helen Fifoot, Philippa Terry and Stephen Forster.

Clint Wilson

Corporate Development Director, ParentPay Group

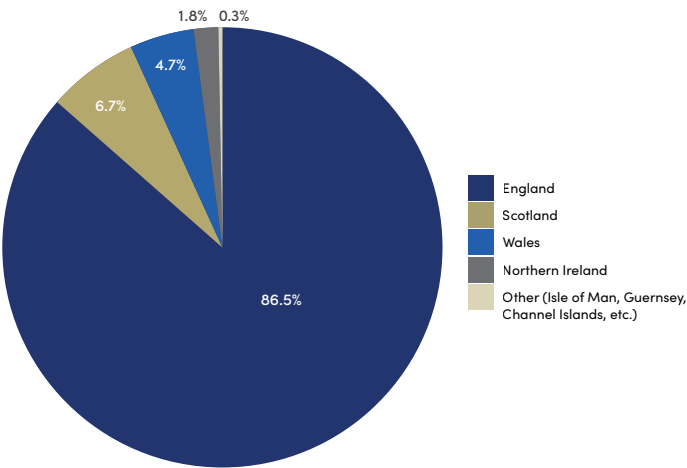
Clint is a highly accomplished EdTech leader, best known for growing ParentPay from a pre-revenue startup in 2005 into the UK's leading school payments platform and the largest EdTech company in Europe. Now serving as ParentPay Group's Corporate Development Director, he drives strategic growth and acquisitions, while remaining deeply committed to improving outcomes for young people. Clint supports multiple charities focused on children's health, education, and well-being, and has played an influential role in shaping national school food policy – including contributing to the School Food Plan and presenting the ParentPay Group and LACA School Meals Report to a cross-party group of MPs in Westminster.



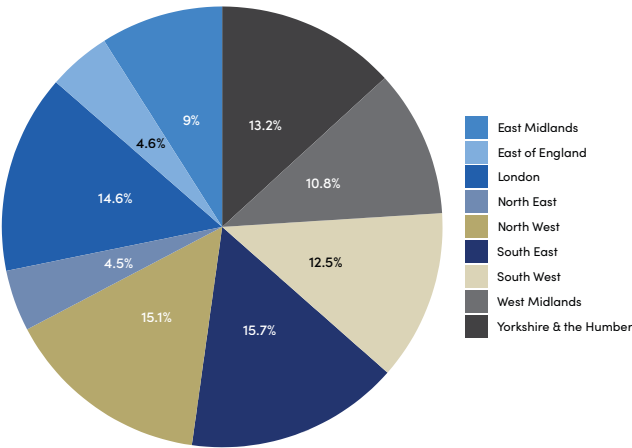
The sample survey

Responses from 236,706 parents/carers from across the UK.

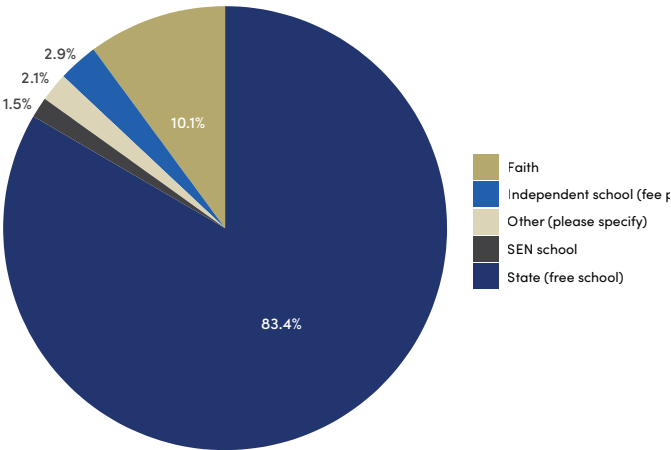
Where do you live?
N = 236706



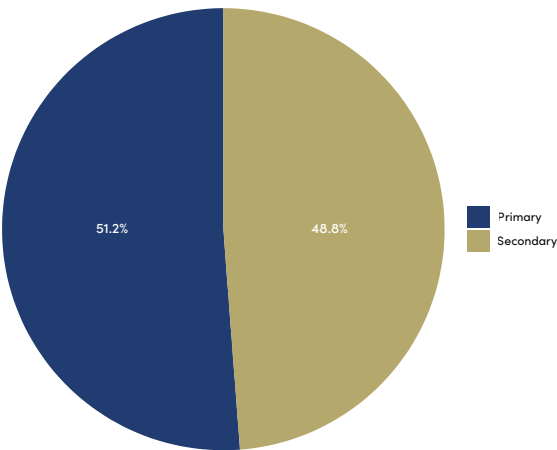
Where in England do you live?
N = 199521



What school type is your child in?
N = 231263



What school stage is your child in?
N = 231263



Please note:

When reading this report, the results have been rounded to either 1 or 2 decimal places. This is why some of the data points don't reach or go above 100%.

For multi-select questions, the N represents the number of answers chosen which is why the N may be higher than the number of parent responses to the survey.

School meals vs packed lunches

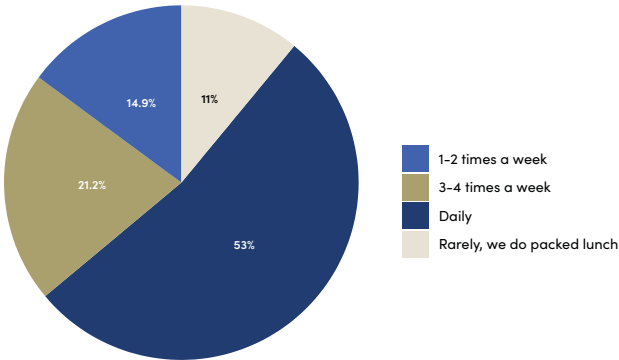
Multiple factors influence parental decisions when it comes to meal provision for their children during the school day. Weighing up the convenience, affordability and nutritional value of school meals vs packed lunches plays an important role in helping many parents make the right choice for their children. For others allergy concerns, variety, quality and portion size may play a more prominent role.

For educators, catering teams and school meal providers, increasing uptake of school meals requires understanding of the thought process behind these choices and how it intersects across different demographics. But before action can be taken to support parents to make more informed decisions, we must understand what matters most to parents and what barriers exist that prevent more children from enjoying appetising, filling and nutritious school meals.

The good news is this section is packed full of insights from thousands of parents. Read on to discover the school meals vs packed lunches 'state of the nation', the factors that are influencing parents the most and what some parents feel is missing from school meals provision.



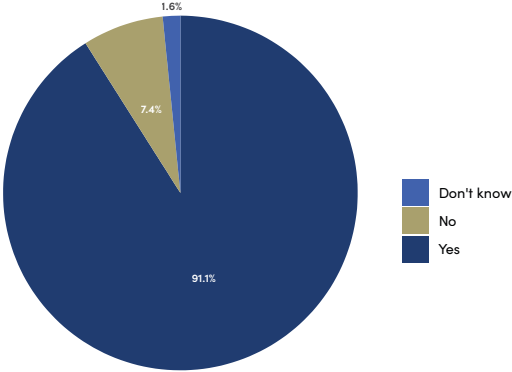
Figure 1: how often does your child have a school meal?
N = 228535



Regularity of school meals

To kick things off, we asked parents how often their child/children have a school meal. For parents whose children aren’t entitled to free school meals (FSM), over half (53%) said that their children have a daily school meal, as depicted in Figure 1. A mix of school meals and packed lunches was the next most popular choice, with one third of parents (36%) taking this hybrid approach. The remaining 11% of parents sampled said they prepare packed lunches.

Figure 2: has your child ever tried school meals?
N = 24413



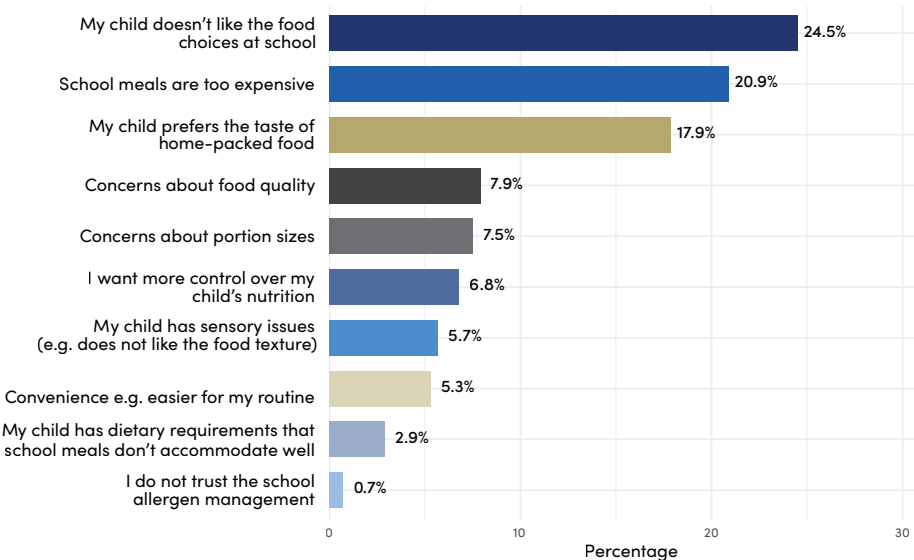
Previous use of school meals provision

When we asked these 11% of parents if their children have ever tried school meals, 91.1% said that they had (see Figure 2). This suggests that more can be done to incentivise more regular uptake of school meals provision for this segment. Introducing reward programmes for healthy meal choices, theme days and children’s choice days, as well as cooking classes for children are some of the ways schools around the UK are responding to this challenge.¹

Reasons for choosing packed lunches

Keen to understand why this minority of parents opt for packed lunches over school meals, we asked them to tell us the main reasons their child has a packed lunch instead of a school meal. As highlighted in Figure 3, the feedback received indicates that taste preference is the main factor at play, with the most frequently selected reasons for choosing a packed lunch relating to children not liking the choice of school meals available (25%) and children preferring the taste of home packed lunches (18%). As most of these children have tried school meals previously, we can assume that the barrier to increased uptake for this portion of parents relates to lack of appeal, rather than lack of awareness. Despite the ongoing cost of living crisis and the continued financial pressure on families, cost was highlighted as a concern by only a small subgroup of parents (21%) who exclusively opt for pack lunches.

Figure 3: what are the main reasons your child has a packed lunch instead of a school meal?
(Select all that apply)
N (all selections) = 39183





Satisfaction with school meals

Looking again at parents who utilise school meals provision over packed lunches, the feedback is generally positive, with most parents rating school meals as ‘good’ (43.3%) or appropriate (32.8%) and a smaller proportion rating them as ‘very good’ (17.3%). However, while this data suggests that school meals are generally satisfactory with an average 3.7 out of 5-star rating, room for improvement is evident especially in parents’ perception of the quality of school meals.

Selection criteria

While parents may assess the quality of school meals on an emotional level, our data indicates that they select them based on more practical considerations. For instance, looking at Table 1, we can see that most parents agreed or strongly agreed (81.5%) that convenience is a main reason for choosing school meals over packed lunches. Providing children with a hot meal at lunchtime was another factor that 75.2% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed was a main reason for school meal selection. This is incidentally the same number cited in our 2024 School Meals Report. Peer influence was modest, with 46.5% of parents saying they agreed or strongly agreed that their children’s friends opting for school meals was a main reason for choosing school meals.

From a health and nutrition perspective, our data confirms that these factors are valued by many parents but are not as clearly decisive. 15.4% of parents said they strongly disagree and disagree that nutritionally balanced food is a main reason for selecting school meals, while 41% remained neutral and 43.5% said they either agree or strongly agree. While convenience and hot meals were cited as the most frequently agreed upon reasons for choosing school meals, variety tops the tables when it comes to evaluation of the quality of provision. However, it’s important to note that parents may implicitly value variety through related benefits, such as introducing children to new foods.

Table 1: what are the main reasons you choose school meals for your child?

Reason	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	Neutral	Agree/Strongly Agree
Convenience	4.7%	13.8%	81.5%
Hot meal	6.4%	18.4%	75.2%
Introduces child to new foods	24%	29.1%	46.9%
Friends have it	20.1%	33.3%	46.5%
Improves social skills	18.9%	36.9%	44.2%
Nutritionally balanced	15.4%	41%	43.5%
Fresher food	18.4%	40.4%	41.3%
Good value for money	22.1%	38.5%	39.4%
School enforced	61.0%	28%	11%

Assessing quality

Assessing the quality of school meals can be difficult for many parents, especially those with secondary school-aged children. Figure 4 captures parents’ feedback relating to how they assess the quality of school meals. The majority (31.6%) said that the most important quality signal for them is their children’s feedback. This was followed by choice and variety (18.4%), health and nutrition (15.2%) and value for money (13.5%).

This data was substantiated when we asked parents what would make them more likely to choose school meals. Again, demand for more variety is evident. Looking at Figure 5, we can see that 19.2% of parents say they’d like more menu choices and less repetition. Affordability is another top motivator, with 17.2% of respondents suggesting that lower costs would make them more likely to choose school meals. And while 1 in 10 parents are already satisfied, a further 1 in 10 parents state a desire for bigger portions, indicating concerns about whether school meals are filling enough, especially for older or more active pupils.

Figure 4: how do you assess the quality of school meals? (Select all that apply)
N (all selections) = 486999

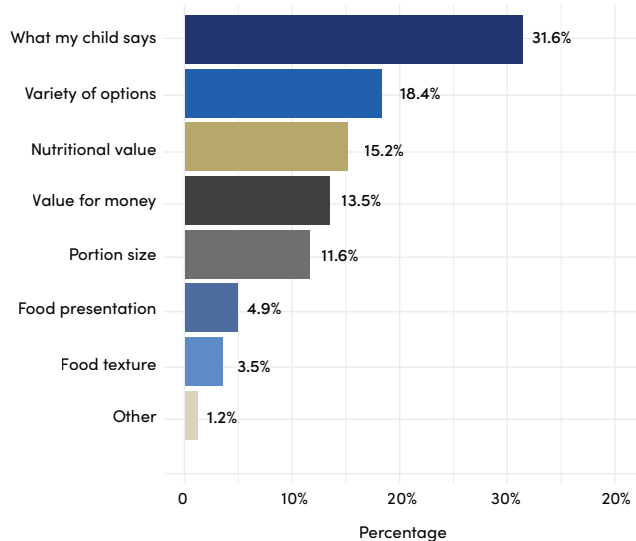
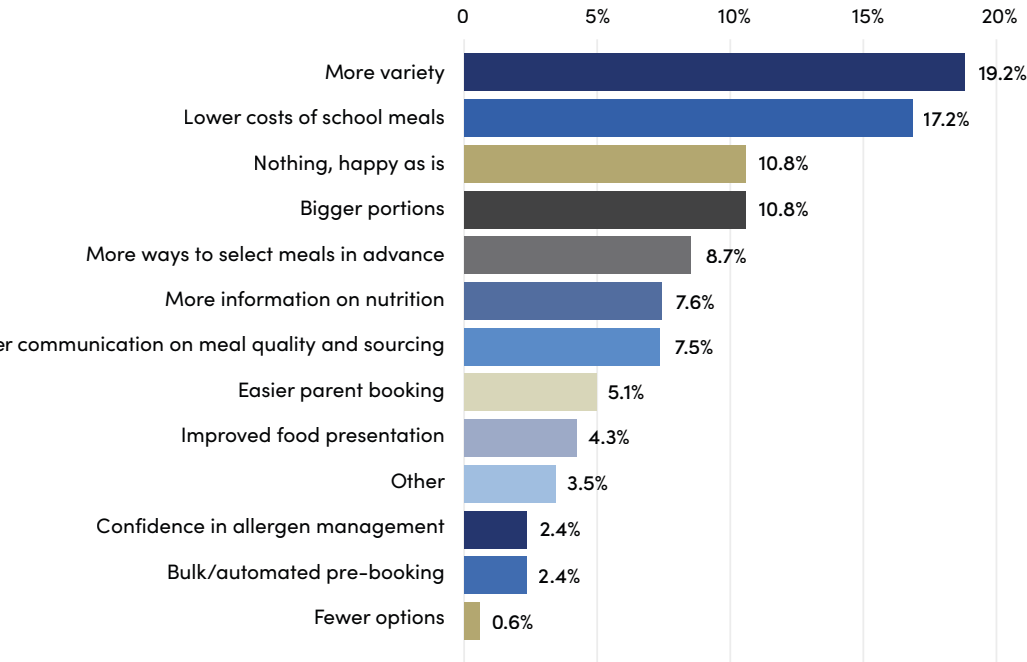


Figure 5: what would make you more likely to choose school meals?
N (all selections) = 457964



Starting the school day right

To close this section of our survey, we asked parents to share their views on school breakfast provision. Surprisingly, just over half (52%) of parents said they either didn’t know or didn’t think their child would want breakfast at school. However, 48% said they believed their child would use breakfast provision occasionally if available. A further 32% said their child would use it 3 or more times per week, which indicates that demand is higher than current usage. Demand for breakfast provision at school differs across the UK. For instance, looking at Table 2, we can see that parental demand is lowest in Scotland.

Interestingly, where breakfast provision is available, uptake is low. A third of parents (33.3%) whose children attend one of the 55% of schools that offer breakfast provision report that their children do not use breakfast clubs, compared with 22% of parents whose children do.

This low uptake could reflect challenges with food appeal, timing, convenience and associated stigma. Lack of awareness is also a barrier to uptake of school breakfast provision across the UK. This argument becomes more compelling by the fact that a quarter (24.5%) of parents surveyed did not know if breakfast options were provided by their children’s school.



Table 2: desire for a breakfast provision by country

	Total responses	1-2x per week	3-4 per week	Everyday	I don't know	Never
England	194540	16.17%	9.24%	22.66%	15.70%	36.23%
Northern Ireland	4167	17.54%	9.31%	22.10%	12.77%	38.28%
Other (Isle of Man, Guernsey, Channel Islands, etc.)	729	14.40%	8.78%	24.01%	16.46%	36.35%
Scotland	15319	14.37%	9.50%	17.96%	15.10%	43.06%
Wales	10770	15.21%	10.61%	27.85%	14.80%	32.53%

Contributor insight

The 2025 School Meals Report offers an encouraging, yet realistic view of where we stand and where improvements can be made. The good news is, over half of parents whose children aren't eligible for free school meals choose them daily, and the majority rate the quality as good or very good. That's encouraging, especially considering the pressures on school catering teams to deliver nutritious meals at scale. Equally promising is parent satisfaction with provision. These figures reflect the hard work of schools and catering teams who strive to deliver nutritious and enjoyable meals for students.

However, the report also highlights areas for growth, and this is where the opportunity lies. What's needed now is a continued focus on making school menus even more appealing and diverse. We should also recognise that parents don't only choose school meals for convenience. They want to know their children are well-fed, trying new foods, and developing healthy eating habits. Yet the report also highlights a concerning disconnect around nutrition. School meals should be a flagship of healthy eating, introducing children to nutritious, exciting food that sets lifelong habits – not just a convenient box to tick.

But for that to happen, meals must meet children where they are – offering variety, adequate portion sizes for older students, and choices that reflect both nutritional standards and the preferences of young diners.

Philippa Terry

**Chief Operating Officer, Juniper Ventures Ltd
and LACA Board Member**

Philippa has worked in education catering for nearly 20 years, starting her career in Tower Hamlets and later supporting Newham Catering and Cleaning Services to transition into Juniper Ventures. As Chief Operating Officer, she's passionate about her work – knowing the difference it makes to children having a hot, healthy, and nutritious meal every day at school, especially in Newham where child poverty is well above the London average. She's also committed to ensuring that as many children as possible benefit from free school meals. As a Board Member of LACA, Philippa is dedicated to ensuring the highest standards of education catering is not only a priority in the communities that Juniper serves, but for every child across the UK.



Free school meals (FSM) entitlement

The continued cost of living crisis, expanded eligibility, demographic changes and improved identification have prompted significant increases in the number of children entitled to FSMs in recent years.

With the Government's 2025 Spending Review decision to grant FSMs to all children in Universal Credit households, the trend is set to continue, creating an estimated 500,000 more beneficiaries of the scheme in September 2026.²

Keen to deep dive into the issue and explore how FSM entitlement has changed, we asked eligible parents a series of questions relating to use of school meal services, opinions on the impact of FSMs and more.

Read on to discover our findings ...



Increasing FSM entitlement

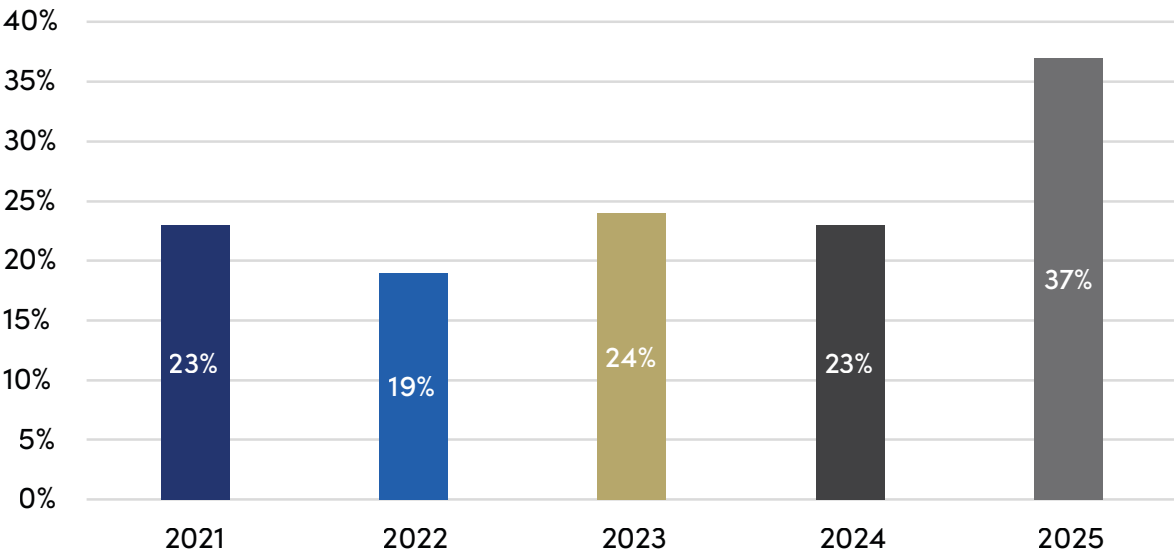
In January 2024, around 2.09 million children were entitled to FSMs. This jumped to 2.17 million children in January 2025, representing a net increase of 77,700 children in a single year.³ Our findings correlate with national DfE data, with an increased number of children reported as entitled to FSMs in our 2025 parent survey (inclusive of UIFSM and means-tested). Drilling down into our data, as illustrated in Figure 6, FSM entitlement is sitting at 37% (this includes FSM, UIFSM and UPFSM [Wales]). According to our data, 54.4% of primary school children (this includes FSM, UIFSM and UPFSM [Wales]) and 18.6% of secondary school aged children are now entitled to FSM.

The drivers behind this increase are multifaceted. Evidence from pilots suggests that FSMs improves academic progress and nutrition, which has prompted policymakers to expand entitlement. Examples of this include the 2014 introduction of UIFSM and Universal Credit transitional protections, which have boosted FSM numbers significantly. Additionally, continued cost of living pressures have pushed more families into poverty. Demographic shifts and a higher child population following the highest annual live birth rate recorded in recent decades in the UK in 2012 (812,970)⁴ translates to more children in schools and a marked increase in absolute FSM numbers. Finally, improved identification and registration is supporting better access to FSMs for entitled children, with some local authorities shifting from an opt-in to opt-out system, which is increasing FSM registration by thousands.⁵



Figure 6: year-on-year comparison of parents entitled to FSM

N = 236706



Country split

When comparing FSM entitlement across the UK, findings highlighted in Table 3 indicate that Northern Ireland has the lowest percentage of children who are entitled to FSMs (16.2%), while Wales has the highest (57.5%), followed by Scotland (53.1%) and England (34%). Note: all of these figures include children entitled to UIFSM and UPFSM. As Wales offers UPFSM to all primary school children and Scotland offers it to children in primary 1 to 5, higher rates of FSM children are expected in these countries.

Table 3: parents entitled to FSM by country

	Yes	No	Total
England	34.0%	63%	204424
Wales	57.5%	40.7%	11156
Scotland	53.1%	44.6%	15976
Other (Isle of Man, Guernsey, Channel Islands, etc.)	24.7%	68.6%	813
Northern Ireland	16.2%	81.7%	4337

Uptake of FSMs

As part of this report, we asked parents with children entitled to FSMs to tell us about their usage of the scheme. Of those who are entitled (37%), the majority (29%) said that their child/children use FSMs 4 to 5 times per week. However, there is scope to drive uptake further, as our data shows that 71% of eligible children are not accessing their FSM entitlement as often as they could be. Correspondingly, national statistics suggest that around 1 in 10 eligible children still aren’t registered for FSMs, often due to stigma or language barriers. Introducing mechanisms to better engage and educate parents on eligibility criteria and registration processes could serve to increase uptake and support more children to benefit from FSM provision.



Sentiment towards FSM provision

When it comes to how parents view FSMs, sentiment is split. While FSMs are highly valued by half of entitled parents, with 50% allocating a 5-star rating to FSMs for their ability to improve quality of life, the remaining 50% of entitled parents reported a more mixed or neutral view. Overall, the average rating for FSMs is 4.1 stars out of 5 – representing high levels of satisfaction, but with room for improvement.

Contributor insight

The policy decision to extend Free School Meals to families claiming Universal Credit is a massive boost for children and families, although I do not understand why hungry children must wait another year. Broader funding arrangements for this policy, alongside current provision, remain outstanding and I fear further cost impact for caterers or schools following its introduction will be untenable. A revised base price with annual indexation would address future funding challenges and help to avoid the annual crisis and debate about what needs to be reduced to make ends meet.

Notably, there remains a huge lack of knowledge around 'value' and the amazing quality of food produced for just pence on the plate. All too often, media reference to school food is anecdotal, with the same old-imagined experiences from the past quoted to raise a laugh. Many parents are simply unaware of the excellent value we provide. If we could find a way to share this more broadly and regularly it would demonstrate how great food supports the health, well-being and education of children and young people in our schools.

Stephen Forster

**Retired Business Development Director of Chartwells
and LACA Board Member**

Stephen is a former Chair of LACA, the school food people, and has worked in the school food sector for more than 30 years, within both public and private sectors. Stephen has led the development and publication of the LACA Allergens Guidance and Risk Assessment Process which provides a policy platform for caterers across the country. Dedicated to championing continuous improvement of school food provision, Stephen recently lead a review into the level of UPF in use within the sector and presented his findings during a delegate workshop at the 2025 LACA Main Event.



Allergens and special diets



According to Allergy UK, between 5% to 8% of children in the UK live with a food allergy.⁶ The 14 recognised allergens are: celery, cereals containing gluten, crustaceans, eggs, fish, lupin, milk, molluscs, mustard, peanuts, sesame, soybeans, sulphur dioxide and sulphites and tree nuts.

Keeping children safe in school requires careful management, including strict avoidance of allergens.

This section explores the percentage of children with food allergies and how this has evolved year-on-year. It also provides insights on the most common food allergies these children experience, along with other special dietary requirements that impact on school meals provision.

Read on to learn how parents feel about the way schools manage allergies and special diets and what schools and education catering providers can do to promote compliance and increase parental confidence.



Children with food allergies

As expected, our 2025 findings indicate that the vast majority (95.7%) of parents do not have children with a food allergy. We can see that the percentage of parents who do report having children with a food allergy remains relatively static, from 5% in 2024 to 4.3% this year.

Table 4: has your child ever had an allergic reaction to food at school?

No	78.4%
Yes mild	9.6%
Yes moderate	3.7%
Severe	1%
Prefer not to say	6.7%

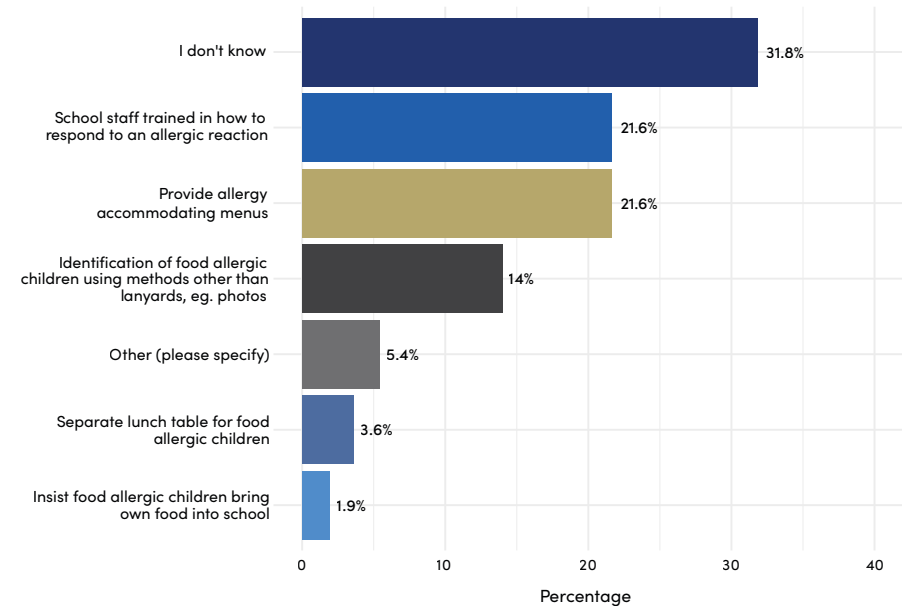
Table 4 details that, among these 4.3% of children, most parents (78%) told us that their child(ren) have not had a reaction, because of consuming school meals. This is testament to the high standards of food allergy management employed by most schools and education catering providers. However, our data highlights that a minority of children with food allergies (14.3%) have experienced an allergic reaction following consumption of school meals containing a known food allergen. These reactions range from mild to severe. While this figure is relatively low, one instance of a child consuming a known allergen in a school meal is one instance too many, especially considering that the consequences of exposure to food allergens can be life-threatening for many children. Reviewing allergen management strategies, processes and procedures is fundamental to keeping children safe. Communicating this activity to parents via regular engagement should also be a priority to build trust and encourage uptake of school meals.

Parental awareness of allergy management

To benchmark parental awareness around allergy management, we asked parents how their children’s school manages food allergies. Figure 7 indicates that the majority (31.8%) of parents do not know how their children’s school handles allergens, strengthening the argument that better parental engagement and communication around allergy management is needed.

Other parents (21.6%) told us that staff at their children’s school are trained in how to respond to an allergic reaction. A further 21.6% said that their children’s school provides allergy accommodating menus, while 14% reported that their children’s school identifies children with food allergies using methods other than lanyards. A minority of parents highlighted use of separate lunch tables for children with food allergies (3.6%) and requirements for children with food allergies to bring their own food into school (1.9%) as tactics adopted by their children’s school to manage food allergies.

Figure 7: which of the following does your child’s school adopt?
N = 12052

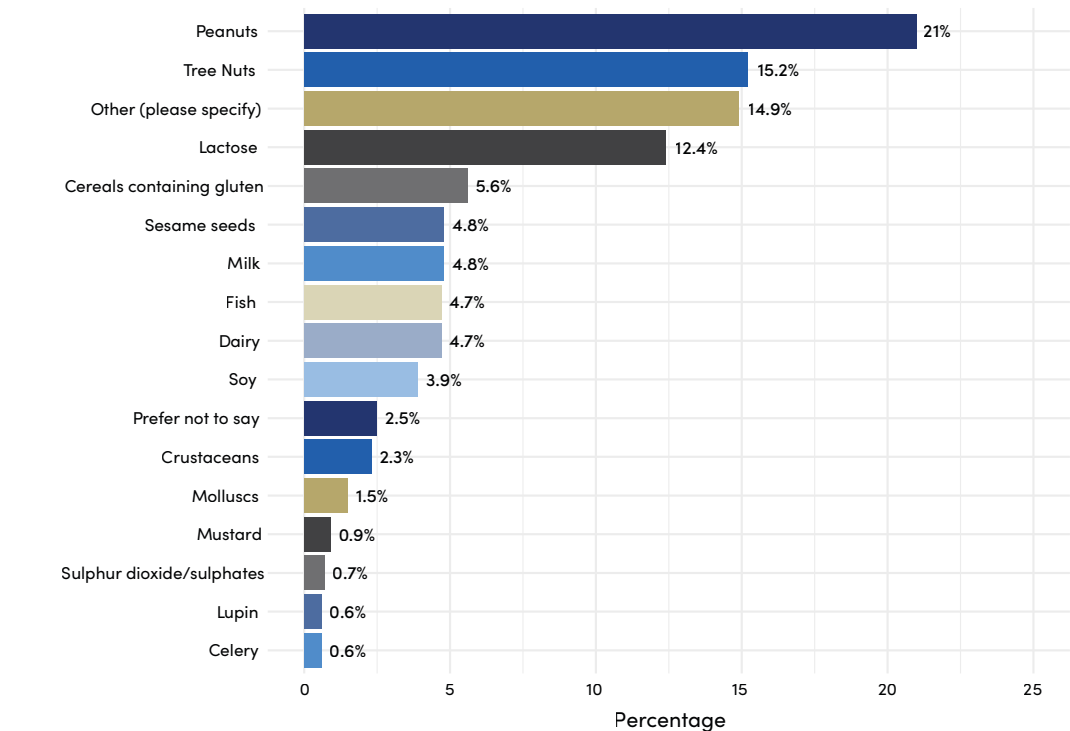


Common food allergens

Looking to Figure 8 and our data suggests that peanuts (21%), tree nuts (15.2%) and lactose (12.4%) are the most reported allergens. Other less common allergies cited by respondents include cereals containing gluten (5.6%), sesame seeds (4.8%) and cow’s milk (4.8%).

Interestingly, more than 1 in 10 parents (14.9%) told us that their child had a food allergy outside of the Food Standard Agency’s list of recognised allergens. This demonstrates the need for close and regular liaison between parents, schools and education catering providers, as well as robust record keeping, to ensure affected children do not accidentally consume less common or non-recognised food allergens as part of their school meal.

Figure 8: what is your child allergic to?

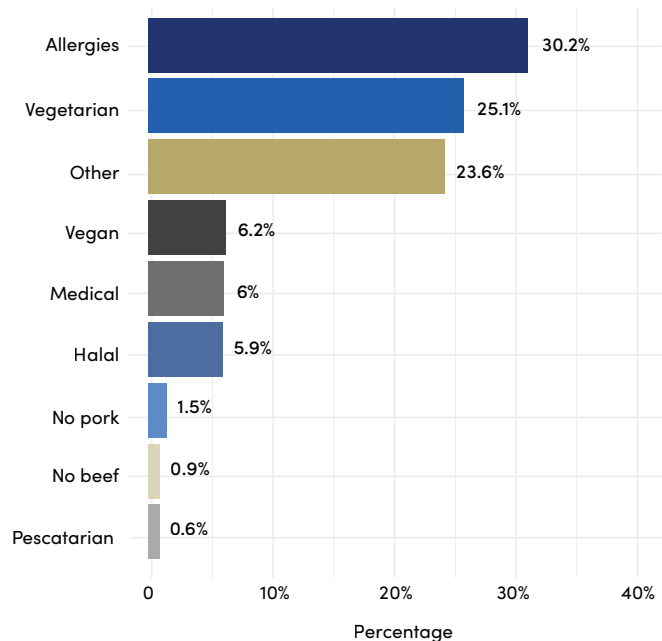


Special dietary requirements

Outside of allergy management, we wanted to find out what proportion of parents have children with special dietary requirements that require careful management by schools and education catering providers.

Our findings, highlighted in Figure 9, uncovered that 15% of parents said that their child had a special dietary requirement, with a vegetarian diet topping the list with 25.1%. Vegan diet requirements accounted for 6.2%, medical-based diets accounted for 6% and Halal for 5.9% – demonstrating the vast variety of special diets schools and education catering providers must now accommodate.

Figure 9: percentage of pupils with alternative dietary requirements (excluding ‘no special requirements’)
N = 30300



Trust in allergen management & special dietary support

Overall food allergen management in schools is well trusted by parents, with 70.6% rating it as good or very good and 25.6% rating it as appropriate. On average parents rated their child’s school’s allergy management a 4.1 out of 5 stars.

The picture is marginally less positive where special dietary support is concerned, with 65.8% of parents rating their child’s school’s dietary management as good or very good and 27.8% rating it as appropriate. This is reflected in the 3.9 out of 5 stars average rating and suggests that parents feel there are less robust systems and procedures in place in some schools to manage special dietary requirements, compared with food allergens.

Rate your schools allergen management



Rate your schools dietary management



Contributor insight

Every child should be able to enjoy safe, nutritious food at school. But for children with a diagnosed food allergy, this can be challenging. So we welcome the 2025 School Meals Report which provides in depth, up-to-date information on food allergies in primary and secondary schools across the UK, based on the responses of more than 236,000 parents.

We recognise it can be challenging to provide a wide variety of meals in schools, especially as the survey shows that 15% of foods children are allergic to are outside the top 14 allergens. So, it is encouraging that 70% of parents rated their school's allergen management as good or very good. However, a third of parents were not aware of their school's food allergen policies, and only 22% said school staff were trained in how to respond to a food allergic reaction, showing the need for improved awareness of the work going on around food allergies in schools. It is also a shame that almost 4% of parents opt to send their child to school with a packed lunch rather than have a school dinner, either because the school is unable to accommodate their dietary requirements or they don't trust the school allergen management policies.

Schools, caterers and parents need to work together to make sure all pupils feel included and safe when eating at school. This includes training for staff on how to respond in a food allergy emergency and urging schools to hold spare adrenaline auto-injectors (AAIs) to keep children safe.

The Natasha Allergy Research Foundation is working with school caterers, LACA and ParentPay Group to make sure schools get the support they need to keep children with food allergies safe. Our new educational programme, [Allergy School](#), offers a suite of resources to help schools, teachers and pupils to become more food allergy aware. I'd urge all schools to sign up for these free resources so that all children can feel safe and included at school.

Tanya Ednan-Laperouse OBE

**Co-founder of The Natasha Allergy Research Foundation,
the UK's food allergy charity**

Tanya co-founded The Natasha Allergy Research Foundation, the UK's food allergy charity, with her husband Nadim after their daughter Natasha died aged 15 from an allergic reaction to a baguette that had sesame seeds baked into the dough. Natasha was severely allergic to sesame, but the label failed to mention this ingredient. Following Natasha's death in 2016, the charity successfully campaigned for improved labelling on pre-packed foods for direct sale, and Natasha's Law came into force in October 2021. The charity also funds medical research, bursaries to train the next generation of allergy specialists and campaigns for a safer world for people with food allergies. Tanya has been awarded an OBE in recognition of her services to charity and for people with allergic disease.



Meal organisation – selection

With enhanced understanding of how parents view school meals vs packed lunches, FSM eligibility and management of food allergens and special dietary requirements, it's time to explore how parents feel about organising school meals.

This section explores how school meals are selected, parents' views on the current selection methods provided by their child's school or education catering provider and what enhancements they'd like to see in the future.



Selection methods

When we asked parents to share how school meals are selected for their children the majority of the time, the message was loud and clear: children are the main decision makers and action takers. Looking at Figure 10, we can see that 69.6% of meals are chosen by the child either in the canteen (52.3%), in the classroom (12.7%) or via an app (4.6%). For parents who typically assume responsibility for school meals selection, 27.5% pre-order online, while a very small minority (1.3%) still rely on paper-based methods of school meals selection most of the time.

Figure 10: how do you handle your child’s meal selection, the majority of the time?
N = 194720

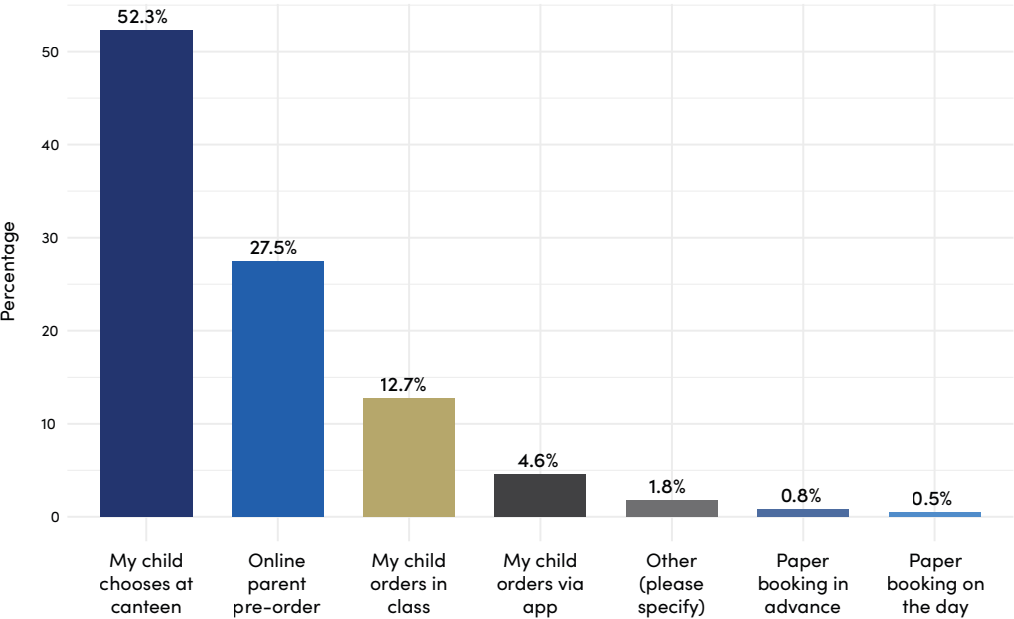
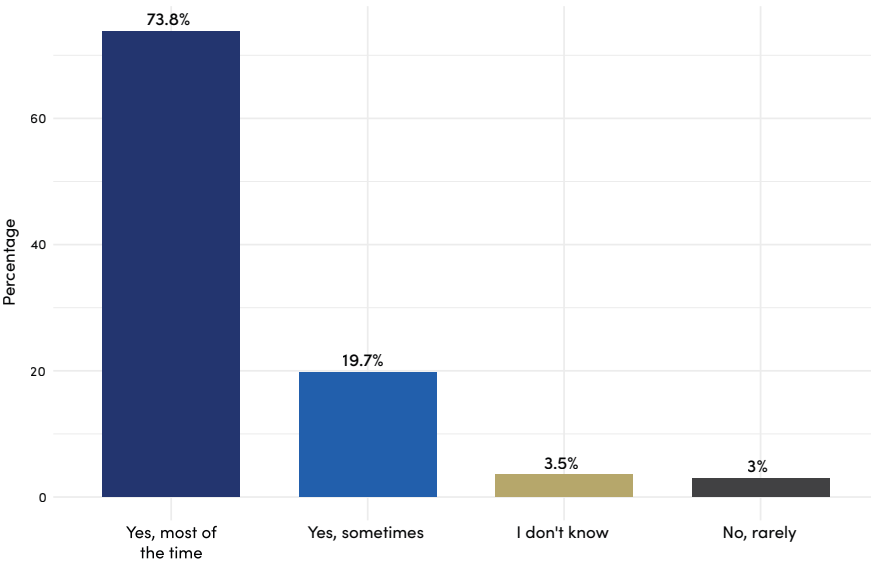


Figure 11: does your child always get the meal they want?
N = 63162



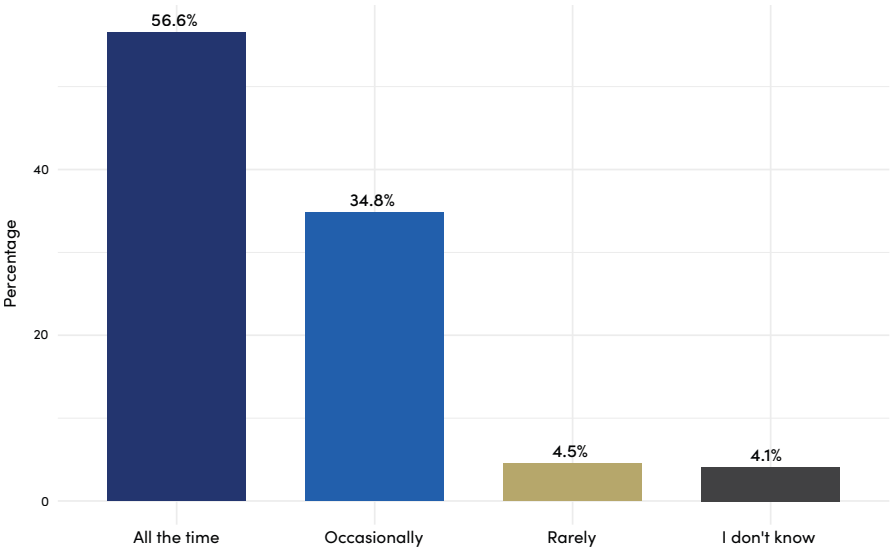
Giving children what they want

To understand the gap between what’s ordered and what’s available on the day, we then asked parents if their child always gets the school meal they want. Data illustrated in Figure 11 confirms that, reassuringly, 93.5% of parents believe that their child gets the school meal they ordered at least sometimes, with 73.8% saying their child gets the meal they want most of the time. Only a small minority of parents (3%) told us that their child rarely gets the meal they want, while a further 3.5% said they didn’t know.

Interestingly, parents who pre-book online in advance were 25% more likely to say their child gets the meal they want most of the time compared with when the child is choosing in the canteen – demonstrating the value this selection method delivers to both parents and children.

Figure 12: how often do you pick the same meals or patterns of meals for your child?

N = 63163



Repeat meal selection

Despite parents valuing variety, our data suggests familiarity is driving selection decisions. Figure 12 highlights parents’ responses to the question: how often do you pick the same meals or patterns of meals for your child? Most (56.6%) told us ‘all the time’ and a further 34.8% told us ‘occasionally’.

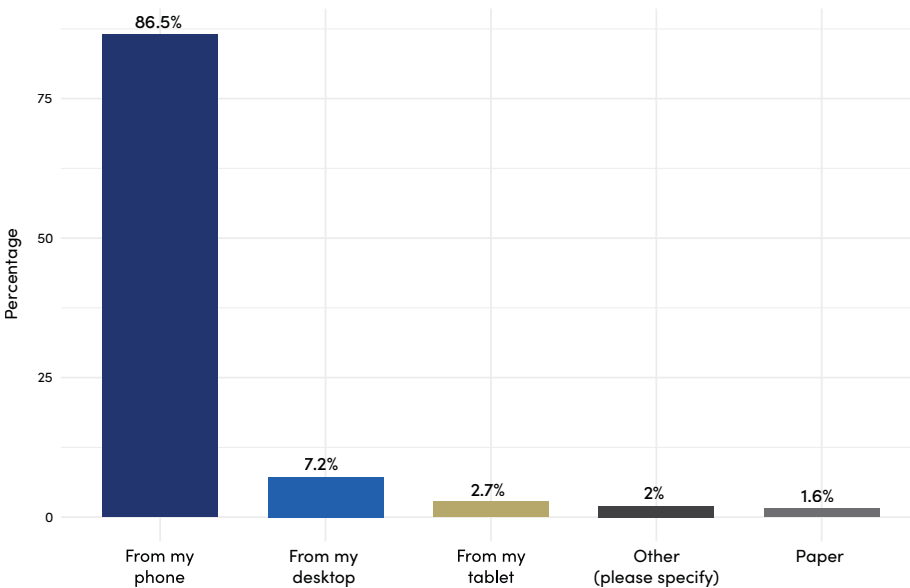
Comparing this data with feedback referenced earlier in this report, we can observe a disconnect between parents’ desire for variety and their real-world selection habits. This can potentially be attributed to time pressures faced by busy parents attempting to spin multiple plates, while balancing the need to ensure their child eats and enjoys their school meal selection.

Platforms for selection

When we asked parents how they currently book school meals, 86.5% told us that they use their mobile phones, highlighting the need for responsive, mobile-friendly online booking platforms and phone apps. Looking to Figure 13, we can see that a further 7.2% said they book via a desktop computer and 2.7% said they book from a tablet. Only 1.6% said they use paper-based booking processes.

Figure 13: how do you currently book school meals?

N = 63162



Enhancing the experience for parents

With most parents utilising online platforms to select and order their children’s school meals, we asked parents what improvements they’d like to see in the future.

Table 5 highlights that almost three quarters of parents (72%) said they’d like a ‘meal review’ feature where they or their children can rate meals to improve future recommendations. This indicates that parents are looking for convenient feedback loops and more agency, particularly where meals can evolve over time.

Most parents (52.4%) said they’d like the systems they use to recommend meals based on their child’s past choices – supporting the theory that time-poor parents need technology to do more of the heavy lifting when it comes to school meals selection.

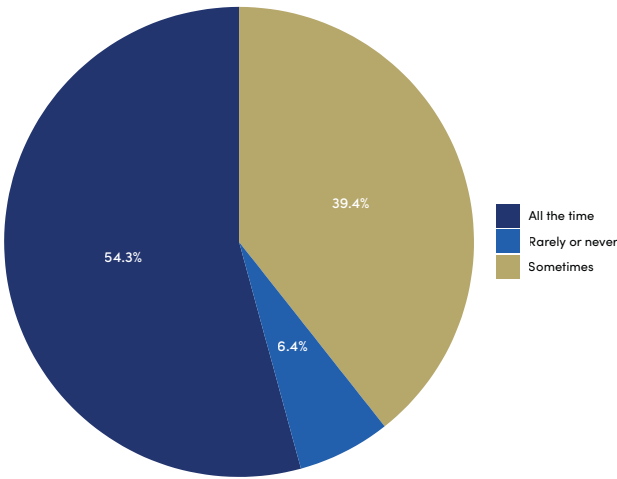
Finally, almost half of parents (45.8%) said they’d like the ability to see ‘popular meals’ chosen by other children when selecting their child’s meal. This suggests that some parents are receptive to and would value peer reviews to support school meals selection for their child. However, some parents have reservations, with 16.7% strongly disagreeing or disagreeing, which highlights the importance of introducing change via consultation and as part of a robust parental engagement strategy.

Table 5: when choosing meals, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	Neutral	Agree/Strongly Agree
I know what my child would like to eat	2.5%	15.6%	81.9%
I would like a 'meal review' feature where you / your child rate meals to improve future recommendations	4.3%	23.7%	72%
I would like a feature that recommends meals based on your child's past choices e.g repeat meal patterns	10.8%	36.8%	52.4%
I would like the ability to see 'popular meals' chosen by other children when selecting meals	16.7%	37.5%	45.8%

Figure 14: how often do you talk about the food your child ate at school?

N = 218937



Conversations about school meals

Our data also confirms that most parents are confident to order school meals on behalf of their children, with 81.9% of parents telling us that they know what their child would want to eat during the selection process.

These claims are bolstered by data, depicted in Figure 14, relating to conversations about school meals between parents and their children. When we asked parents if they speak to their children about school meals at home, 94% said they do talk to their children about what they ate at school. Over half (53.4%) said they do this ‘all the time’ and 39.4% said they do this ‘sometimes’.

Contributor insight

The 2025 School Meals Report highlighted that parents would like to see more variety in school meals but this is then contradicted when they're responding to questions about pre-ordering patterns.

Responses supporting the introduction of meal reviews are high and I would support this. This functionality would provide valuable information for caterers by identifying concerns, supporting quality improvements and menu development. I would also recommend that caterers take any available opportunities to engage with parents through apps, school communications or by attending parent events for face-to-face engagement.

Cath Holmes

**Retired Area Catering Manager Kirklees LA (Education)
and Honorary LACA Member**

Cath retired earlier this year, following 40+ years in the catering industry, with the last 18 years spent working for Kirklees Council as a manager for the school meals service. During this time, Cath supported the service to introduce Cypad Kitchen Manager and Meal Selection, which helped drive efficiencies and improve service delivery. Cath has also worked as a service lead for Health & Safety and Allergen Management, commencing a programme to achieve Allergen Accreditation in over 100 primary schools.



Meal organisation – bookings

Pre-booking school meals brings notable benefits to schools and education catering providers by improving operational efficiency, reducing food waste, and enhancing cost control. It enables accurate forecasting, better inventory and staffing management and helps ensure allergies and special dietary requirements are appropriately managed.

By involving parents in the booking process via pre-ordering, it's possible to boost uptake. What's more, when parents pre-book school meals, valuable data is captured that can help providers plan future menus based on known demand for certain meal options leading to improved service quality and commercial performance. And let's not forget, pre-ordering makes life easier for catering staff and pupils when collecting their school meal, with more efficient meal service and shorter queues.

With increased understanding of what's driving the school meals selection process, we wanted to dig a little deeper into parents' views and behaviours in relation to pre-booking their children's school meals. Read on to discover insights into parents' ability to pre-book school meals, and how this differs across the UK, how parents feel about pre-booking and what's standing in the way of more parents getting on board.





Parent sentiment

The benefits of pre-booking school meals are evident but how do parents feel about the process? Our data indicates that most (80%) parents find pre-booking easy or very easy, and 73.1% rate pre-booking school meals positively. On average, parents rated their pre-booking system with 4.1 out of 5 stars.

Barriers to pre-booking

Despite positive parent sentiment surrounding pre-booking systems, several practical barriers and behavioural frictions exist that could be preventing wider uptake. Table 6 captures the key reasons why some parents don’t utilise pre-booking systems. 44.6% said they agreed or strongly agreed that payment upfront was a barrier. A further 40.7% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that forgetting to book was preventing them pre-booking school meals. 32.4% of parents also told us that they agreed or strongly agreed that booking deadlines are too early and strict, while 25.1% said they agreed or strongly agreed that a lack of time prevents them pre-booking school meals. A smaller percentage of parents (18.9%) said pre-booking systems were too complicated.

We know parents are confident in their knowledge of what their child likes to eat, and we know that according to most parents pre-booking systems work well technically and are viewed positively. Yet a problem remains clear: even satisfied users struggle to maintain pre-booking habits. The challenge is therefore overcoming the behavioural friction that limits uptake. Introducing automated push notifications or other parent communications to remind parents when and how to pre-order school meals could help overcome barriers, as could introducing more flexible payment options and booking deadlines.

Table 6: why do parents not utilise pre-booking systems?

Rate the following statements	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	Neutral	Agree/Strongly Agree
I forget to pre-book	23.9%	35.5%	40.7%
The booking deadlines are too early/strict	25.6%	42%	32.4%
I do not have time to pre-book	36.2%	38.6%	25.1%
Payment upfront does not suit me	35.7%	19.7%	44.6%
The system is too complicated	42.3%	38.8%	18.9%

Booking by region

We asked parents across the UK if they can pre-book school meals, and how they feel about it. Table 7 highlights that – compared to other countries in the UK – parents in Scotland are more likely to have the ability to pre-book school meals but are less likely to want to when they do have the ability. Contrastingly, our data indicates that demand for pre-booking is highest in England and ‘other’ regions (Isle of Man, Guernsey, Channel Islands, etc.).

Table 7: would you like the ability to pre-book school meals? Split across the countries in the UK.

	Total responses	No	Other	Yes, I currently do not have this option	Yes, I have this option already and do not like it	Yes, I have this option already and I like it.
England	187487	42.57%	2.10%	26.07%	2.97%	26.28%
Northern Ireland	4014	40.23%	1.47%	25.34%	2.27%	30.69%
Other (Isle of Man, Guernsey, Channel Islands, etc.)	385	37.52%	2.92%	26.86%	3.65%	29.05%
Scotland	14827	28.21%	2.83%	13.95%	5.32%	49.69%
Wales	10416	31.78%	1.91%	17.75%	2.95%	45.61%

Drilling down into regions in England in Table 8, the North East and North West represent the areas with the highest number of parents who want, but do not currently have, the ability to pre-order school meals for their children.

Table 8: would you like the ability to pre-book school meals? Split across the regions of England.

	Total responses	No	Other	Yes, I currently do not have this option	Yes, I have this option already and do not like it	Yes, I have this option already and I like it.
East Midlands	16996	44.48%	2.12%	25.84%	2.57%	25.00%
East of England	8664	47.20%	1.74%	22.48%	2.54%	26.04%
London	26281	43.59%	2.10%	31.15%	2.88%	20.27%
North East	8416	48.15%	2.52%	30.09%	2.42%	16.83%
North West	28446	45.47%	2.21%	30.71%	2.25%	19.36%
South East	29740	41.49%	2.18%	20.72%	3.50%	32.11%
South West	23665	32.65%	1.96%	17.03%	4.06%	44.30%
West Midlands	20292	40.75%	1.96%	27.21%	3.16%	26.92%

Booking by school phase

Key trends are evident in Table 9, which looks at responses by school phase. Desire for pre-booking is high among parents of secondary school aged children, with 30.11% wanting but not having the ability to pre-order school meals and only 5.26% having the ability to pre-order currently. Contrastingly, 57.49% of parents of primary school aged children can already pre-order and a further 19.81% express desire for this functionality. This indicates that uptake of school meals could be increased by providing more parents of secondary school aged children with the ability to pre-book their school meals.

Table 9: would you like the ability to pre-book school meals? Split by Primary and Secondary.

	Total responses	No	Other	Yes, I currently do not have this option	Yes, I have this option already and do not like it	Yes, I have this option already and I like it.
Primary	111377	20.54%	2.16%	19.81%	5.03%	52.46%
Secondary	106052	62.52%	2.11%	30.11%	1.12%	4.14%

Contributor insight

The data in this section of the report confirms that children are the main decision makers, with some influence from parents and carers, but most influence is from peers.

Although variety is a key driver to opting for a school meal, actual choices reflect a pattern and desire for familiarity in choices made in most cases. For school meal providers this makes pictures of menu choices, marketing and tasting events an important aspect in influencing students’ choices. Linking to food trends on the high street is another way to encourage uptake of school meals. However, sometimes the high street can lack innovation, especially for younger children, and serve to discourage more adventurous food choices so it’s best to approach with a healthy degree of caution.

Helen Fifoot

Retired Head of Catering Doncaster City Council
and Honorary LACA Member

Helen has worked in the operations sector of the school meals industry for 25 years. With a focus on food and the menu offer to students, Helen is passionate about sourcing local produce and encouraging local providers to engage in the supply chain in order to deliver quality school meals provision. Helen is also committed to raising awareness of the nutritional and allergen information of our meals to stakeholders, including school leaders, students, parents and carers.



Meal organisation – payments

The price of food, including dairy, meat and fruit, has increased well above inflation following the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit. National living wage increases, along with employer National Insurance contributions and pension auto-enrolment, are also driving up staffing costs.

Add to this the funding shortfall associated with UIFSM, which sees schools or caterers often subsidising 55–60p per meal,⁷ and it's clear to see why many schools and education catering providers are under significant financial pressure. To remain viable, some have been forced to reduce portion sizes, reduce menu options and use lower quality ingredients.⁸

Avoiding these measures and maintaining provision of high-quality, well-portioned, nutritious and tasty school meals for all children means pricing meals fairly for parents who aren't entitled to FSMs. But how much are school meals costing these parents? What do they think about the amount they're paying? And what are their preferred types of payment?

Read on to find out ...



How much are parents paying?

We asked parents across the country how much they're paying for their child's school meals. The results indicate that, nationally, the majority (29.2%) of non-FSM parents pay more than £2.80 per meal, followed by the second largest majority (18.5%) who pay between £2.50 and £2.65. Interestingly, parents in Northern Ireland are paying the most for school meals, with the country also recording the lowest percentage of parents whose child(ren) are eligible for FSMs. See Table 10 for a full country breakdown of what parents are paying for school meals.

Table 10: how much do you pay for school meals? Split by country.

	Total responses	£2.50 - £2.65	£2.66 - £2.80	I don't pay for school meals	I don't pay for school meals, but sometimes I pay extra	Less than £2.50	More than £2.80
England	164542	18.92%	13.84%	25.21%	4.61%	6.82%	30.59%
Northern Ireland	3639	36.88%	15.33%	7.94%	4.01%	3.41%	32.43%
Other (Isle of Man, Guernsey, Channel Islands, etc.)	612	38.56%	9.64%	16.18%	2.94%	7.35%	25.33%
Scotland	12948	15.11%	8.02%	48.31%	2.58%	10.89%	15.08%
Wales	9445	6.80%	7.38%	56.11%	3.80%	2.57%	23.34%

Zoning in on what parents are paying for school meals across England, our data – detailed in Table 11 – highlights some key trends. Notably, it is evident that the North East of England has the most parents paying below £2.50 per meal (10%), while the South West has the lowest rate of parents paying more than £2.80 (22.01%).

Table 11: how much do you pay for school meals? Split by region of England.

	Total responses	£2.50 - £2.65	£2.66 - £2.80	I don't pay for school meals	I don't pay for school meals, but sometimes I pay extra	Less than £2.50	More than £2.80
East Midlands	14605	17.53%	13.50%	22.87%	4.79%	5.37%	35.95%
East of England	7536	21.72%	13.47%	19.64%	5.21%	7.36%	32.59%
London	23834	13.47%	11.15%	32.58%	5.31%	4.67%	32.81%
North East	7409	20.64%	12.96%	20.45%	5.10%	10.00%	30.85%
North West	25031	19.80%	15.66%	20.18%	5.07%	8.08%	31.21%
South East	26185	17.68%	13.18%	25.97%	4.24%	5.37%	33.56%
South West	20463	21.94%	13.95%	32.12%	3.46%	6.52%	22.01%
West Midlands	17553	20.42%	13.67%	25.06%	5.39%	7.34%	28.11%
Yorkshire & the Humber	21918	20.73%	16.17%	20.78%	3.75%	8.99%	29.58%

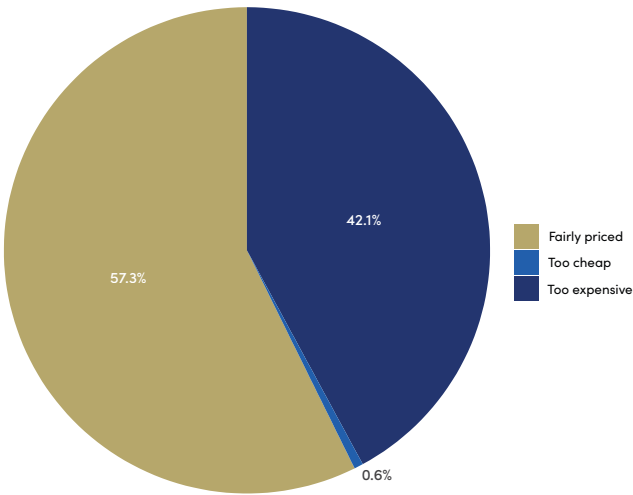
Next, we looked at what parents are paying for school meals based on school phase. Table 12 highlights that nationally almost 50% of secondary school parents are paying more than £2.80 per meal, compared with only 9.64% of primary school parents.

Table 12: how much do you pay for school meals? Split by Primary and Secondary.

	Total responses	£2.50 - £2.65	£2.66 - £2.80	I don't pay for school meals	I don't pay for school meals, but sometimes I pay extra	Less than £2.50	More than £2.80
Primary	97258	19.35%	9.75%	51.42%	1.54%	8.30%	9.64%
Secondary	93918	17.56%	16.66%	3.63%	7.40%	5.29%	49.46%

Figure 15: how do you feel about the price of school meals?

N = 137480



Parents’ opinions on price

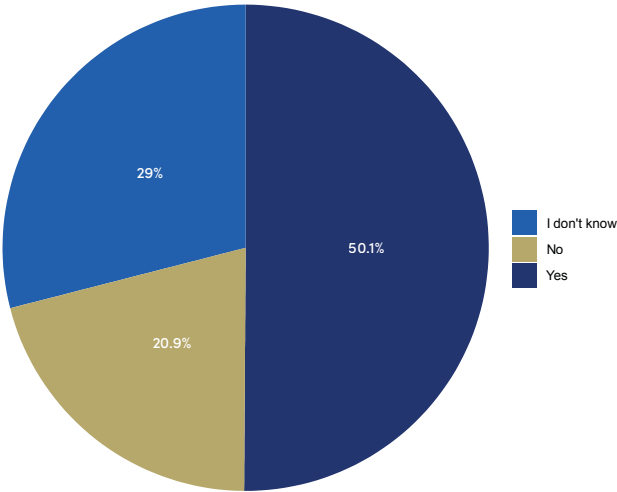
We asked parents how they feel about the price they’re paying for their children’s school meals. The results suggest opinion is divided, as detailed in Figure 15. While over half (57.3%) told us they believe school meals are fairly priced, 42.1% said they were too expensive.

Table 13 highlights how parents’ perception of price differs across the UK. Parents in Wales were most likely to say school meals are too expensive (49.23%), followed by England (42.93%) and Northern Ireland (33.90%). Contrastingly, parents in ‘other’ regions (Isle of Man, Guernsey, Channel Islands, etc.) were most likely to say their children’s school meals were fairly priced (72.46%), followed by Northern Ireland (65.65%) and England (56.46%).

Table 13: parent rating of price of school meals across countries

	Total responses	Fairly priced	Too cheap	Too expensive
England	122814	56.46%	0.61%	42.93%
Northern Ireland	3345	65.65%	0.45%	33.90%
Other (Isle of Man, Guernsey, Channel Islands, etc.)	512	72.46%	0.98%	26.56%
Scotland	6677	21.24%	0.91%	27.84%
Wales	4132	50.39%	0.39%	49.23%

Figure 16: would incentives (e.g. points, discounts) for regular school meal use encourage you to book more meals?
N = 218937



Incentivising school meals

We then asked parents if incentives, such as points or discounts for regular school meal use, would encourage them to book more. Data contained in Figure 16 confirms that half of parents (50.1%) said that they would. Interestingly, 47% of the parents who told us school meals are too expensive said that an incentive would encourage them to book more meals, as detailed in Table 14.

Table 14: how do you rate the price of school meals and would incentives encourage you to book more meals?

	Total responses	Fairly priced	Too cheap	Too expensive
I don't know	33877	61.43%	0.78%	37.79%
No	23947	66.92%	1.23%	31.85%
Yes	79656	52.61%	0.37%	47.02%

Understanding perceptions of added value

To understand what features matter to parents and would encourage them to pay more for their children’s school meals, we asked them to rate a series of statements, and looked at the responses based on their previous answer on how they felt about the price of school meals. Table 15 details their feedback and suggests that while parents are split on price, they are willing to pay more for features that directly benefit their child’s experience. For example, 61.80% agreed or strongly agreed that they’d be happy to pay more for the ability to customise meal options. 55.20% agreed or strongly agreed that they’d pay more to track nutritional information. And 51.30% said sourcing ingredients from the UK would encourage them to pay more for school meals.

This data indicates that parents are less motivated to pay more for school meals for more abstract features, such as food from other cultures, ethically sourced food or sustainability-based benefits. Parents were also less willing to pay more for features that aren’t directly relevant for their child, such as use of organic ingredients.

Table 15: would the following factors make you pay more for school meals?

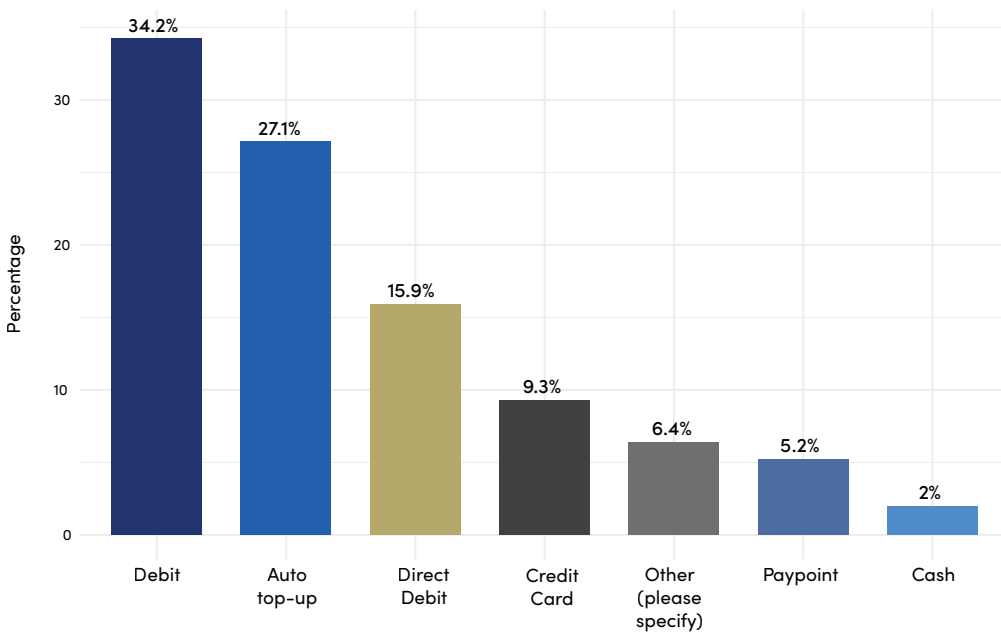
Rate the following statements.	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	Neutral	Agree/ Strongly Agree
More customisable meal options (e.g ability to select portion sizes or sides	8.10%	30.10%	61.80%
Nutritionally balanced meals with this information listed/tracked	8.20%	36.60%	55.20%
School meals with ingredients sourced from the UK	8.20%	40.50%	51.30%
Eco-friendly packaging and waste reduction (sustainable meal trays, reducing food waste)	11.30%	40.80%	47.90%
Ethically sourced ingredients	10.70%	45.70%	43.60%
Diversity: foods from other cultures	13.30%	44.20%	42.50%
School meals with organic ingredients	14.70%	46.20%	39.10%

Preferred payment methods

Price point aside, we asked parents how they prefer to pay for their children’s school meals. As captured in Figure 17, the majority (61.3%) of parents confirmed that their preferred payment methods are debit (34.2%) and auto top-up (27.1%). This was followed by direct debit (15.9%) and credit cards (9.3%). Cash was the least popular payment method, with only 2% of parents ranking it as their preferred method of paying for school meals.

Figure 17: what is your preferred payment method for school-related costs?

N = 137480



Contributor insight

Our students and their families deserve value for money, and delicious hot meal provision at lunchtime that is equally funded throughout the UK.

To make this a reality, the school meals sector – along with school leaders, parents and carers – must keep campaigning for services to continue to improve, as they have over the last few years. All children deserve the highest school meal standards and, to deliver this, greater recognition is needed about what goes into creating that quality. The meal price paid, and free school meal funding, is more than the food on the plate – it's everything that's needed to deliver a quality service, including dedicated, professionally trained staff and facility and equipment overheads. It's our collective duty to get these messages across and maintain access to delicious, nutritious and filling school meals for all children.

Helen Fifoot

Retired Head of Catering Doncaster City Council
and Honorary LACA Member



School meal information sharing

Sharing information with parents about school meals can promote healthier eating, support enhanced management of food allergies and special dietary needs and encourage greater parental engagement and more informed decision making when it comes to meal selection.

Sharing information with parents can also play a part in reducing food waste, improving meal uptake and creating feedback loops that allow schools and education catering providers to tailor menus to children's needs and preferences. Getting information sharing right means understanding what adds value and what doesn't. Within this section, we deep dive into parents' opinions on the volume and type of information they receive about school meals and how this can be fine-tuned to improve impact.



Information underload?

When we asked parents how they would rate the amount of information they receive about school meals, the feedback was split. While half told us it was about right, 49% said it was too little. Although small variations were noted, data contained in Table 16 confirms that this split was evident across all countries in the UK. This demonstrates a clear opportunity to tackle the communication gap and support nearly half of parents to become better engaged and better informed about school meals.

Table 16: how would you rate the amount of information you receive about school meals?

	Total responses	Right amount	Too little	Too much
England	178792	49.05%	49.85%	1.10%
Northern Ireland	3819	53.26%	46.11%	0.63%
Other (Isle of Man, Guernsey, Channel Islands, etc.)	637	48.82%	48.67%	2.51%
Scotland	14212	59.27%	39.80%	0.93%
Wales	9982	47.52%	51.59%	0.89%

Dissecting this data by school phase and feedback detailed in Table 17 suggests that parents of primary school aged children are more likely to feel satisfied with the amount of school meal information they receive. The majority (59.24%) of primary school parents told us they receive the right amount of information compared with 39.72% of secondary school parents.

Table 17: how would you rate the amount of information you receive about school meals?
Split by Primary and Secondary.

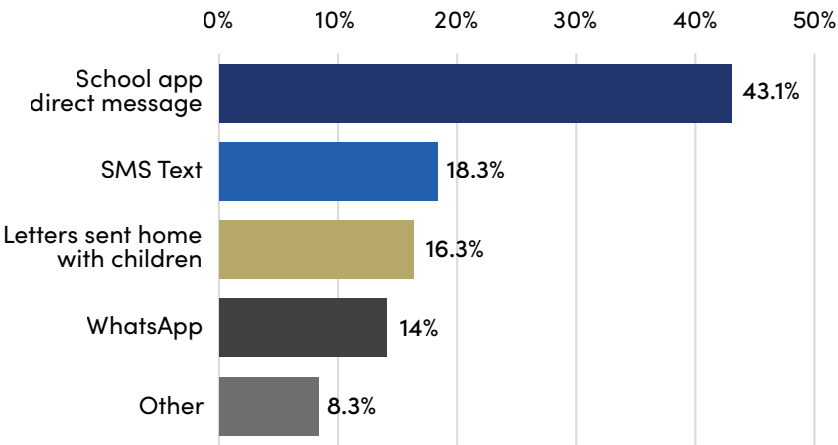
School phase	Total responses	Right amount	Too little	Too much
Primary	106661	59.24%	39.71%	1.06%
Secondary	100781	39.72%	59.19%	1.09%

Platform preferences

Parents feel strongly about receiving the right amount of information about school meals but how they receive that information is also key. With this in mind, we asked parents to tell us how they’d prefer to receive information.

Their responses, detailed in Figure 18, indicate a marked preference for digital communication platforms, with most parents (43.1%) confirming a preference for direct messaging within a school app. This was followed by 18.3% who favoured text messaging. A minority of 16.3% said their preference would be a letter sent home with their child. The key takeaway? App-based messaging should be the primary method for school meal updates.

Figure 18: which would you prefer to be used when receiving school meals information?
N = 282100



Sharing the information parents want

When we asked parents what school meal information they would like their child’s school to provide, demand for transparency and relevance topped the table, as detailed in Figure 19. Specifically, 16.8% of parents said they’d value photos of school meals, 14.5% would like to know how much their child ate, 12.9% said nutritional information would be useful to receive and 10.7% said they’d like information of ingredients used.

Contrastingly, parents were less concerned about general allergen management and food sourcing information, indicating that this information is less on a concern unless it directly affects their child.

Figure 19: what school meal information would you like schools to provide? (select all that apply)
N (all selections) = 549861

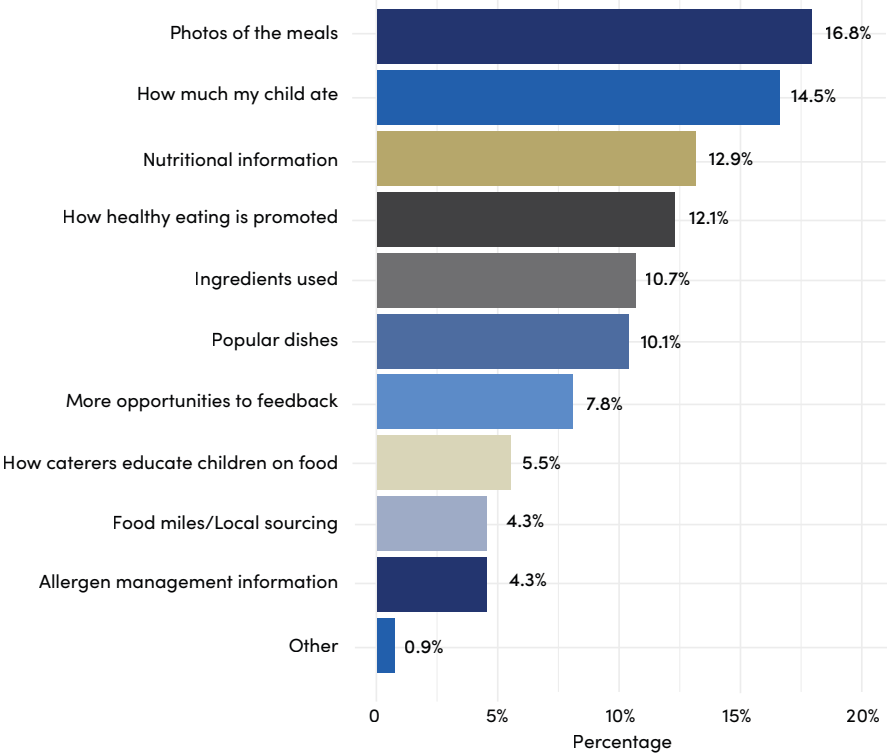
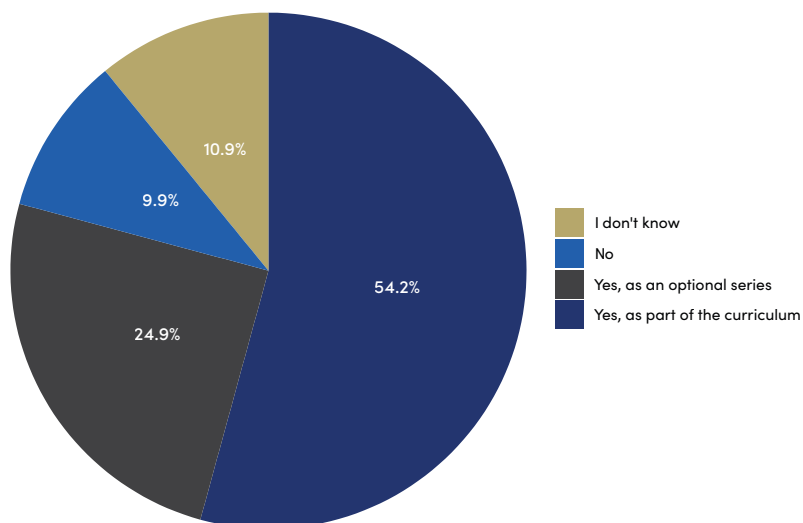


Figure 20: would you like your child to have lessons on food? i.e. Where our food comes from

N = 207441



Desire for food education initiatives

Demand for better information sharing with parents is clear but feedback also confirms that there is strong support from parents for teaching children more about where their food comes from and its nutritional value. Figure 20 captures parents' responses to the question: would you like your children to have lessons on food? The majority of parents (79.1%) confirmed that they would, either as part of the curriculum or as an optional series. Indeed, only 10.9% of parents surveyed opposed food education for their children.

Enhancing awareness can help nurture healthier relationships with food, while supporting increased uptake of school meals. Schools and education catering providers can play a role in supporting children to learn more about food by getting involved with initiatives like *School Food Matters* and *Chartwell's Beyond the Kitchen* award-winning food education programme.

Contributor insight

Perhaps the most important takeaway from this report is the value of communication. Parents rely heavily on their children's feedback when assessing meal quality.

Schools that actively seek student opinions, involve them in menu planning, and create a positive dining environment are not only more likely to see increased uptake but also build trust with families.

With collaboration between parents, schools, and caterers, school meals can continue evolving into something every child looks forward to – and every parent feels confident choosing.

Philippa Terry

Chief Operating Officer, Juniper Ventures Ltd
and LACA Board Member



Key findings

It's clear that school meals continue to play an important role in the daily lives of children across the UK, with an impressive 89.1% enjoying one at least once a week and over half having one every day. But while weekly uptake is on the rise, daily use has slipped slightly since 2024, down by 4%.

For parents, practicality still reigns supreme. School meals are appreciated not just for their convenience factor, but for delivering a hot meal for children – something that's consistently shown up in our findings over the past two years.

When it comes to boosting uptake further, parents have spoken: they want more variety, better value, and larger portion sizes. That's perhaps unsurprising given that nearly half of families are now spending more than £2.80 a day on school meals – an 8.46% jump from 2024. Where FSMs are concerned, although entitlement has increased by 14% since 2024, 71% of entitled children still don't have a school meal every day. With FSM entitlement set to increase in September 2026, there's a pressing need for schools and caterers to examine the reasons behind this and take appropriate action.

Pre-booking is proving its worth too. Parents with the option to plan ahead are more likely to say their child gets the school meal they actually want (75% vs just 50% when children choose in the canteen). Still, it seems familiarity wins out over experimentation. Despite telling us they value variety, 57% of parents stick to the same tried-and-tested school meal routines.

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Something that stood out in this year's report is that parents want more agency and better feedback loops when choosing school meals, with 72% agreeing they'd like a meal review feature where meals can be rated to improve future recommendations.

All in all, the message is clear: school meals remain valued by most parents, but there's still work to be done to improve variety, value for money and portion size. There's also clear opportunity to boost awareness through better engagement and drive uptake by enhancing the booking experience for parents.

Tom Sadler

Head of Product – Catering Division, ParentPay Group

Tom Sadler is Head of Product for Catering, with over 15 years' experience in contract catering technology, particularly within education. He has worked with many of the UK's leading commercial and local authority caterers, combining deep industry insight with a focus on developing smart, reliable solutions that help caterers operate efficiently, stay compliant, and confidently meet evolving demands.



Tom's top tips

- **Consider opportunities to increase school meal variety, value for money and portion size.**

Are these genuine barriers in your school or catering business or is it a perception problem? Would better communication with parents or improved awareness help to tackle the issue? Opting for systems that offer easier ways to stay in touch with parents can help, such as two-way messaging and push notifications. As can embracing automation to introduce more variety and identify patterns relating to which meals are proving popular, and which aren't.

- **Helping all eligible children access their FSM entitlement every day is a key priority.**

With UFSM set to expand, balancing this with ensuring the correct funding is applied and avoiding over-servicing becomes more pressing. Tech can help schools and caterers manage this, with accurate tracking and entitlement allocation. We're expanding our FSM capability to also allow separate rules for breakfast and breaktime provision to further support schools and caterers to balance the books, while ensuring all eligible children receive their entitlement.

- **Implement a bullet proof approach to food allergen management to keep children safe, uphold compliance, boost parental awareness and trust and drive uptake.** Harnessing tech can help schools and caterers achieve this, with tools like real-time allergen data updates giving staff instant access to accurate allergen information, as ingredients are changed or added to meals, and enhanced in-system allergen notifications making alerts more visible to staff to enhance safeguarding.

- **Improving uptake of school meals can be achieved by simplifying the selection and booking process for parents and supporting them to plan ahead, reduce stress and cut the last-minute lunchbox scramble.** Enabling things like automated email nudges, interactive dish feedback and more intuitive, mobile-friendly booking flows can go a long way in helping more families book school meals more often.
- **Introduce an incentives strategy to overcome perceived cost barriers and help more children access hot, tasty, nutritious school meals on a more regular basis.** Points-based rewards systems or discounts for regular use of school meals are some examples. Introducing theme days is another and something that caterers can now implement across multiple sites simultaneously in just a few clicks – freeing up hours of admin time.



Helping you meet evolving demands

Our 2025 School Meals Report offers unrivalled insights based on the views and experiences of more than 236,000 UK parents. Our goal was simple: to support schools and education catering providers to better understand parents and adapt successfully to meet and exceed their evolving expectations. Our future product strategy is guided by this and driven by our mission to listen to what our customers need and constantly innovate to improve our services. Armed with these fresh insights, we'll be delivering meaningful value to push forward outcomes to support caterers, schools and parents to overcome these challenges. Here's how ...

We know behavioural habits are among the biggest challenges preventing wider uptake, with parents sharing their preference for both consistency and forward planning. So, let's make achieving this easier. Our findings confirmed 61% of parents prefer paying via direct debit or auto top-up. Our recently launched Auto Top Up is making life easier for 1.9 million parents (and growing) by helping them to avoid missed school meal payments and panicked packed lunches. Similarly, with 57% of parents repeating the same meal patterns, our product roadmap commits to delivering bulk meal planning tools to give parents the efficiency and convenience they so clearly crave when booking ahead. Pairing these two features with existing automated reminder functionality will deliver ultimate convenience, essentially empowering parents to 'set and forget' their children's school meals for the entire term – and leave Sunday night cut-off dramas firmly behind them.

The 2025 School Meals Report evidenced a deep level of parental engagement with school meals, not just in terms of the volume of responses but through the time parents dedicated to sharing their views and experiences. With an average completion time of 13 minutes, that's 5.9 years of total engagement time. We're introducing a whole host of features to leverage this same passion and willingness to engage with all things school meals – and take conversations with children about what they ate at school from the school gates and move it online.

With 57% of parents repeating the same meal patterns, our product roadmap commits to delivering bulk meal planning tools to give parents the efficiency and convenience they so clearly crave when booking ahead.

So, get set for greater feedback loops with features like dish ratings, feedback and parental messaging that provides you with greater awareness of how parents feel about your school meals. By taking the passion parents have for school meals and transforming it into meaningful and actionable data, we're supporting you to make more informed operational decisions.

These are just some of the ways we're working to support our customers to drive uptake of school meals. If you would like to find out more about what we're doing, you can contact us by visiting parentpay.com/parentpaygroup/catering/

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