

2024

School Meals Report



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Who we are

ParentPay Group

ParentPay Group has long been at the forefront of the EdTech sector. Across the UK and mainland Europe, thousands of schools and millions of parents trust us on payments, communication, meal and information management systems. Our products use cloud-based technology to streamline processes, improve engagement with parents, deliver cashless payments and simplify school meal management for catering teams and schools.

The School Meals Report is delivered by the following ParentPay Group subsidiaries:



ParentPay
parentpay.com

Transform how you manage money with the most secure and trusted cashless solution for schools in the UK. Whether you're a primary or secondary school, MAT or local authority, you can collect and manage payments for meals, clubs, trips, uniform and more – all from one place.

Trusted for: Cashless payments, school clubs, parents' evenings, school trips, school shops



Cypad
parentpay.com/cypad

Cypad is a digital kitchen management and meal ordering platform for caterers, local authorities, and schools. Trusted by over 7,000 kitchens across the UK, the solution is designed to help school caterers harness data when reporting and decision-making – including vital processes to support allergy management and student safeguarding.

Trusted for: Paperless kitchen management, primary school meal ordering, nutritional analysis, facilities auditing



BlueRunner
bluerunnersolutions.com

BlueRunner offers Cashless POS to the market as a bespoke, digital point-of-sale tablet system for schools looking for a till solution to manage busy meal services. Designed to improve speed of service, meal uptake and reduce waste and cost for caterers across primary, secondary and independent schools.

Trusted for: Cashless POS till system, secondary school meal ordering, bespoke branding, hospitality booking, independent school meals



In partnership with LACA

Established in 1989, LACA is the leading body representing professional catering managers and chefs working in the school sector across local authorities, private contractors and individual schools and academies. Since its inception, LACA has set out to inform, develop, represent and support 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.
- School Food Show Competitions to promote excellence in school food including School Chef of the Year and Finishing Touches.
- Learning and development tools and support including allergen risk assessment guides, menu checking services and e-learning courses.

Find out more about LACA and the benefits of membership at laca.co.uk

Introduction

The aim of this research is to understand parents' views on the school meal service and offering available across the UK, to support school caterers in making informed decisions on their catering operation.

Having seen success with this research since 2021, ParentPay Group, represented in this instance by Cypad, BlueRunner and ParentPay, have once again worked with LACA to bring this large-scale school meal research to the education sector.

The survey attracted an overwhelmingly positive response and gathered 206,462 completed interviews. This provides an extremely robust overall sample size across the UK nations and within England.

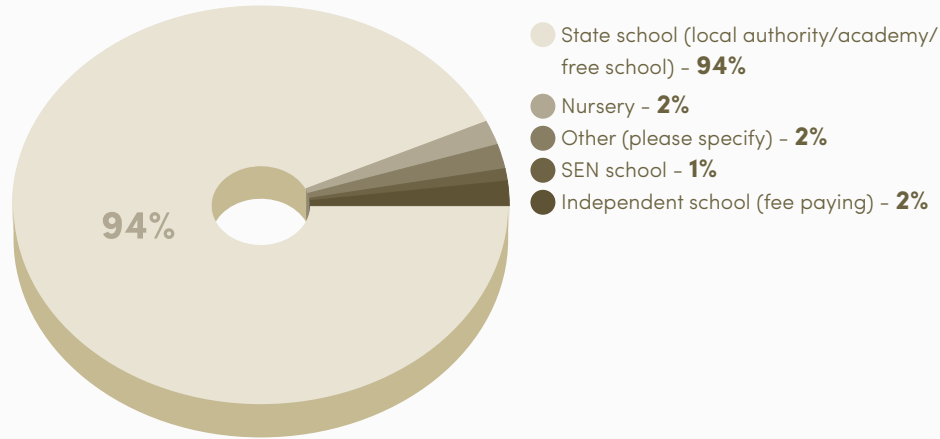
This study helps us to understand what caterers and school leadership teams need to do to ensure their clients and families are happy with the service provided. Comparing the results to the previous surveys and other pieces of research will provide an ongoing understanding of the needs of parents/guardians, school leadership and catering teams.

Note:

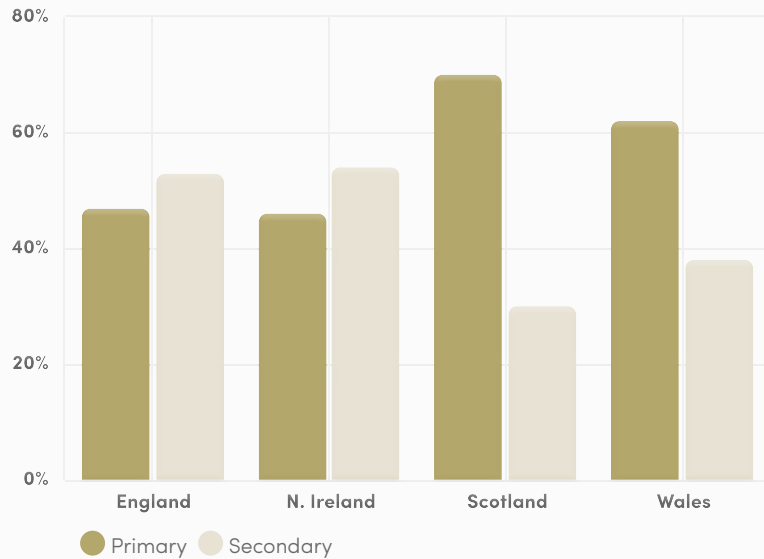
The majority of questions in the survey included an option for 'Don't know' or 'Unsure' which have been omitted from this report. Results have also been rounded up or down where applicable to form whole number figures. This is why some of the data points don't reach or go above 100%.



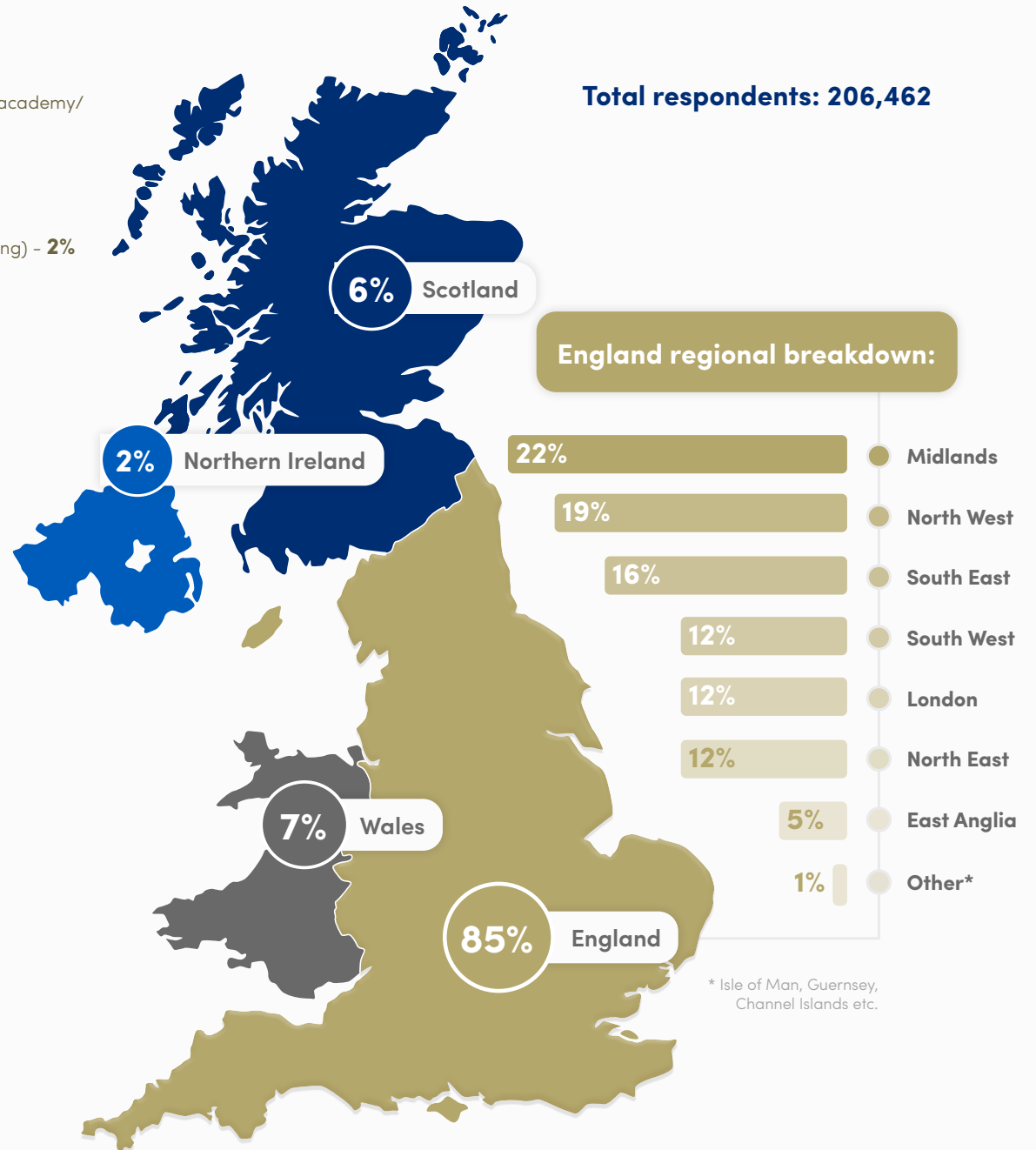
School type:



School ages of pupils:



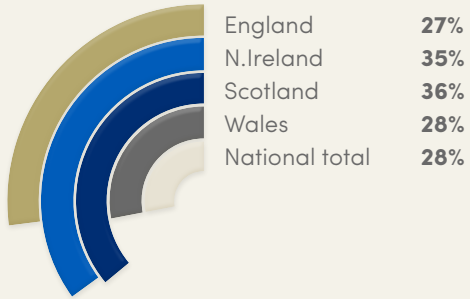
Total respondents: 206,462



School meal provision

School meal provision - all respondents

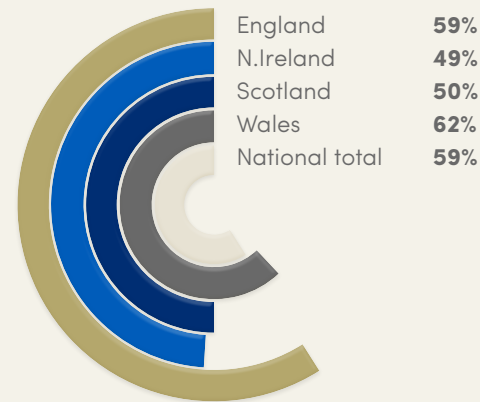
A mixture of school meal provision and packed lunches



Home packed lunch



School meal provision More than 4 days a week*



87% of pupils in the UK are having a school meal at least once a week.

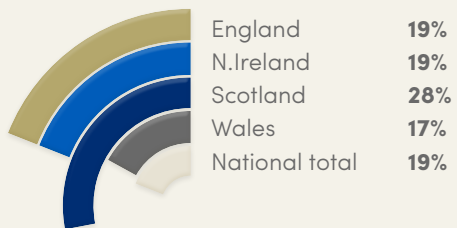
This is up 3 percentage points (pp) from the 2023 report.

2022 – 83% | 2021 – 88%

Overall, more than half of UK pupils are having school meals every day, with more than a quarter swapping between school meals and packed lunches.

School meal provision choices of respondents eligible for free school meals

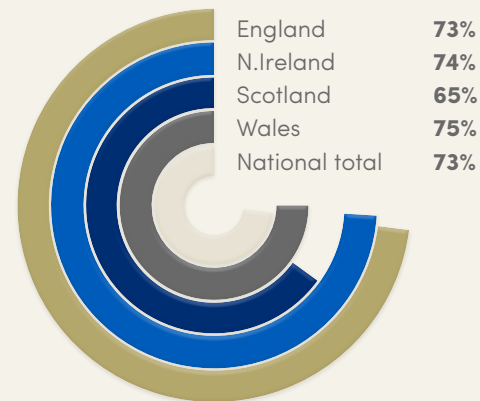
A mixture of school meal provision and packed lunches



Home packed lunch



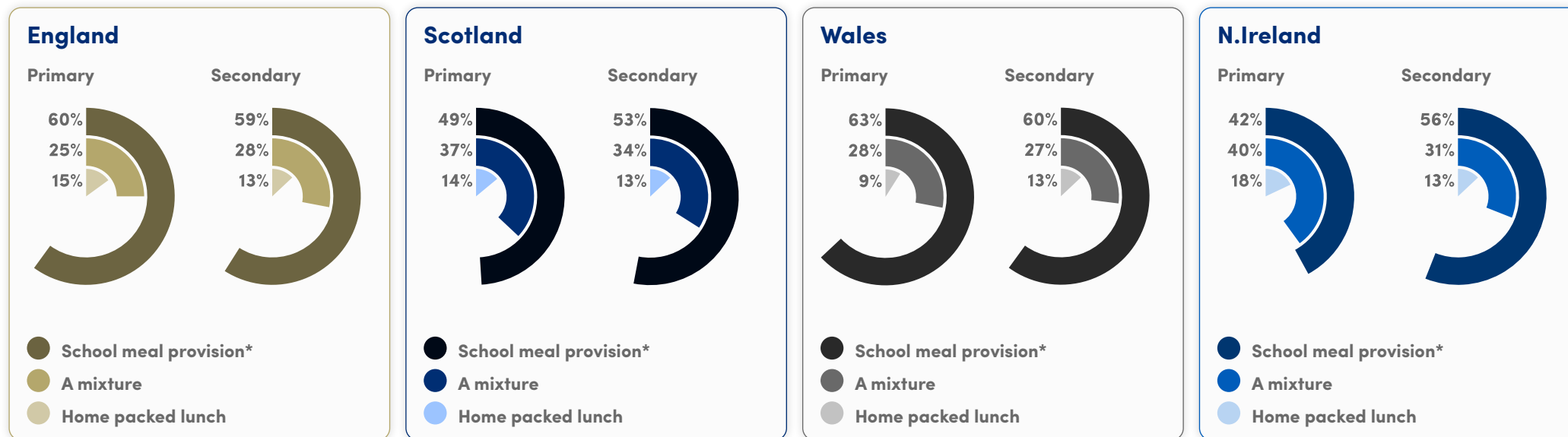
School meal provision More than 4 days a week



The majority (92%) of parents that are entitled to free school meals (FSM), and use them, opt for school meals or a mixture.

There is a slight decrease to 73% in FSM-eligible respondents choosing school meal provision every day compared to 79% in 2023.

School meal provision by primary and secondary



Overall, respondents in Wales are more likely to be choosing school meal provision every day for their children. In 2022, England was the country more likely to use school meals every day – this shift correlates to the staggered roll-out of [Universal Primary Free School Meals](#) across Wales from September 2022 onwards.

School meal provision across regions in England

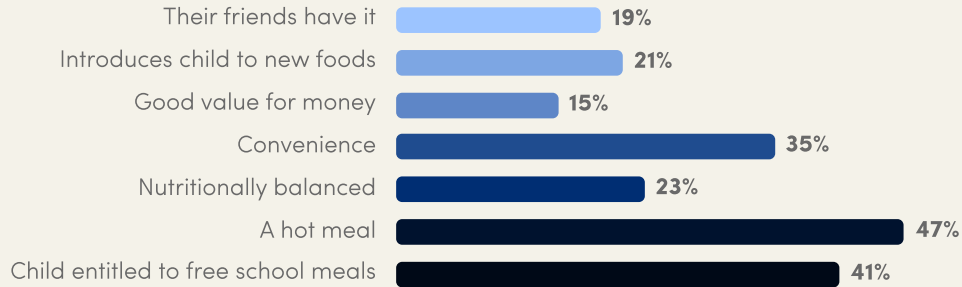
	East Anglia	London	Midlands	North East	North West	Other**	South East	South West
A mixture	32%	23%	29%	22%	22%	21%	32%	30%
Home-packed lunch	16%	8%	16%	13%	13%	13%	15%	16%
School meal provision*	52%	68%	55%	65%	66%	66%	53%	53%

*School meal provision at least 4 days a week

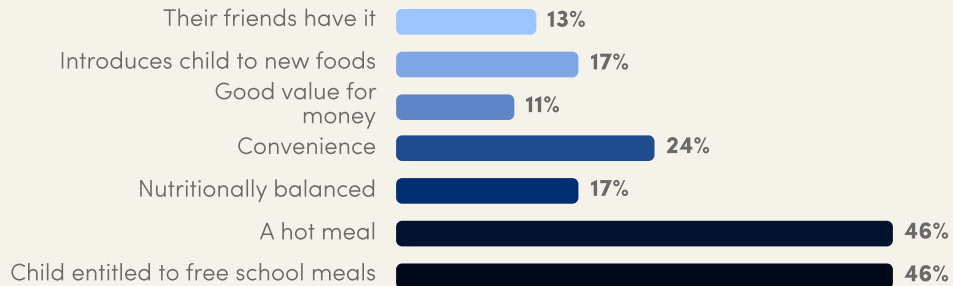
**Isle of Man, Guernsey, Channel Islands etc

Reasons for choosing school meals

Opting for school meals every day



Opting for mixture of school meals and packed lunches



These results indicate that for both groups of respondents across the UK, getting a hot meal and the convenience school meals offer are the most frequent reasons for choosing school meal provision.

LACA commentary

Again this year, LACA's core objective to ensure that all children and young people should be able to access, and benefit from, a freshly prepared, nutritious, and balanced hot meal at lunchtime, is the main reason for parents and carers choosing school meals daily or a mix during the week. It is encouraging that 87% of pupils are having a school meal at least once per week. Having a meal in school also provides support for families, with convenience also cited as a key factor for choosing a school lunch.

With 93% of respondents valuing the impact of the school meal on their child's quality of life, this reflects the importance of the school meal service across the UK.

School meal pricing

How much are respondents who use school meal provision every day paying on average for their children's meals?

	Less than £2.50	£2.50 - £2.65	£2.66 - £2.80	More than £2.80
England	16%	27%	15%	42%
N. Ireland	5%	33%	16%	46%
Scotland	35%	24%	12%	29%
Wales	26%	18%	12%	44%
National total	18%	27%	14%	41%

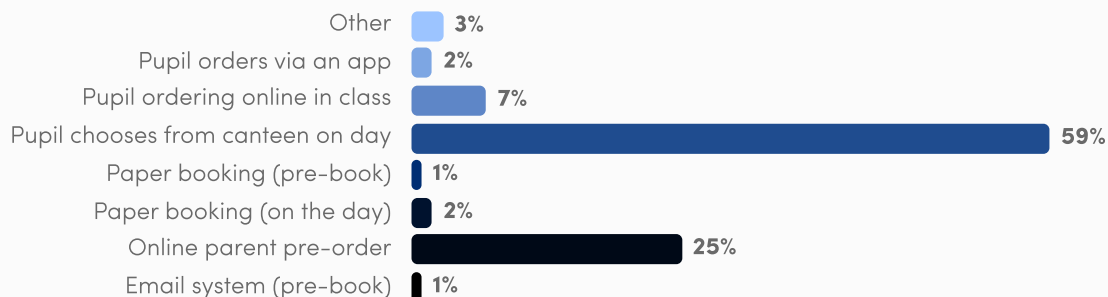
Price rating of hot school meals

Promisingly, the majority of parents surveyed feel that school meals are priced appropriately. Of the UK nations, respondents in Scotland were the most likely to say the pricing of meals is accurate.

The proportion of parents who feel meal prices are too high has increased by 6 pp since 2023, an overall increase of 9% since the 2022 report. This is to be expected with rising inflation and is reflected in the [LACA Cost of Living \(November 2023\) report](#), which examines how caterers are managing the impact of rising inflation.

	Too low	Priced appropriately	Too high
England	1%	61%	38%
N. Ireland	0%	62%	37%
Scotland	1%	75%	24%
Wales	1%	64%	35%
National total	1%	62%	37%

Method of choosing school meals



Meal choice is predominantly done on the day, although over a quarter of parents pre-order online.



Does your child always get the meal they want?

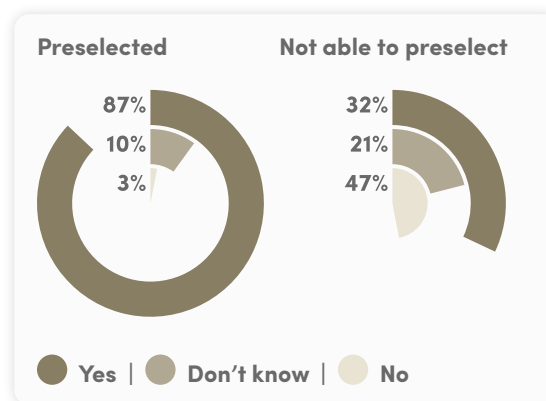
	Don't know	No	Yes
England	18%	32%	50%
N. Ireland	19%	42%	39%
Scotland	11%	17%	72%
Wales	14%	23%	64%
National	17%	31%	52%

Across all parents and carers who responded, nearly half said their children get the meals they want, but a significant proportion – one third – said they don't.

Nearly 1 in 5 don't know whether their child gets the meal they want.

Does your child get the meal you or they have pre-selected the majority of the time?

When splitting this by respondents who can pre-order meals and those who can't, the results show that among parents and older students who can pre-order school meals, 87% of pupils get the meal they choose. This is an increase of 9 pp from last year's report.



Supply chain issues and increases in the cost of staple ingredients mean school caterers are having to change menus at the last minute, and reduce the variety available on menus to ensure they can cook enough plates to meet demand. By utilising digital meal ordering solutions, parents are able to engage more with their children's school meals, plan ahead, and feel confident that their child is receiving the meal they have chosen, increasing school meal uptake.

Having oversight of meals ordered each day means school kitchens can cook to order, reducing food wastage and saving money on ingredients. Using digital menus also means it's easier to make menu changes according to the ingredients available when ordering stock, and the change can be easily reported to the school and parents via the digital platform. This can help reduce the stress of supply chain issues and speed up the school meal service.

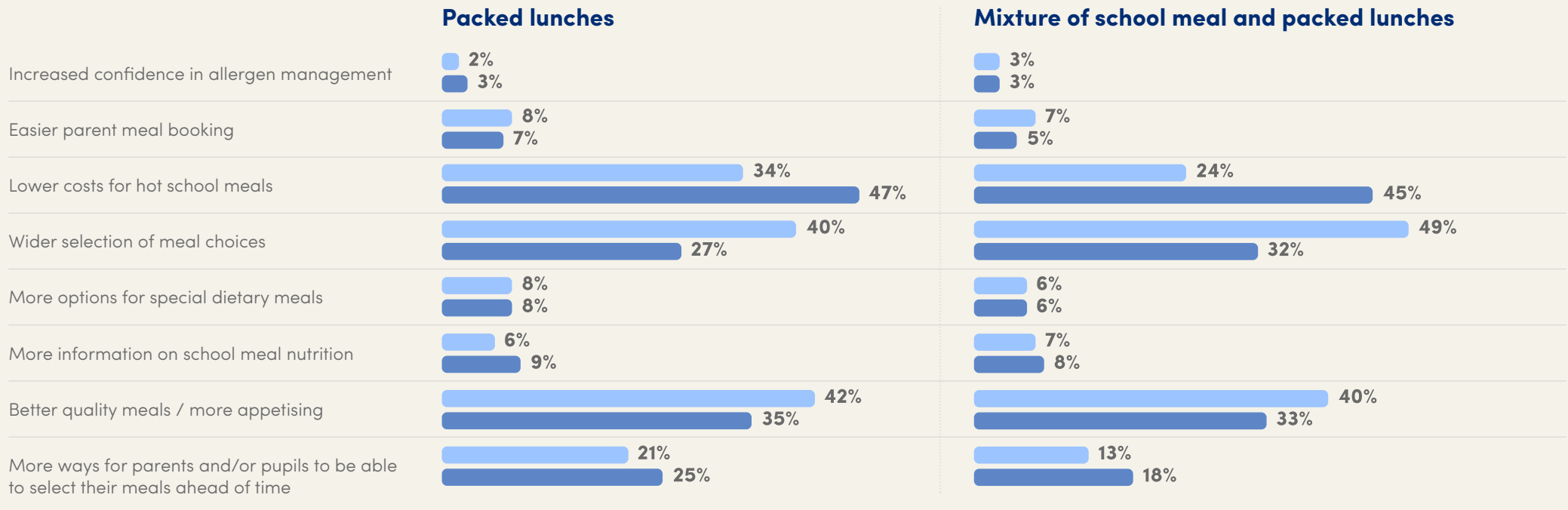
How to increase meal uptake

The top three factors that would encourage increased school meal uptake are:



Lower costs for school meals is the top factor in 2024 for changing from packed lunches or taking school meals more frequently. Meals being of better quality, more appetising or having a wider choice of meals are also top factors and have resulted in this year's increased school meal uptake compared to 2023. School caterers and local authorities can use digital meal management solutions to offer a wider choice of meals while minimising waste and spending on excess stock, by allowing parents and/or pupils to pre-order and cooking to demand.

Which of these would increase the frequency of parents choosing school meal provision?

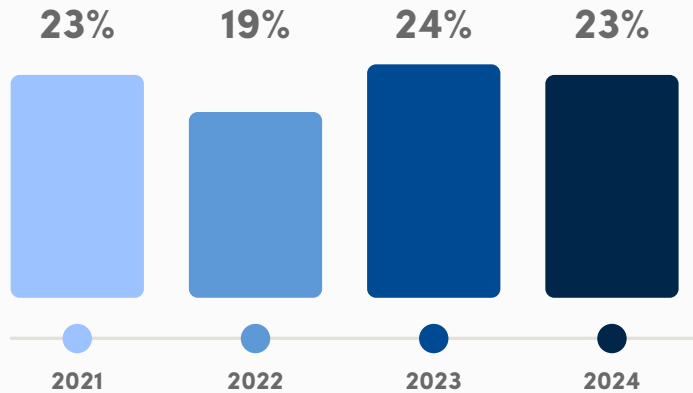


● Primary ● Secondary

Free school meals (FSM)

Year-on-year comparison

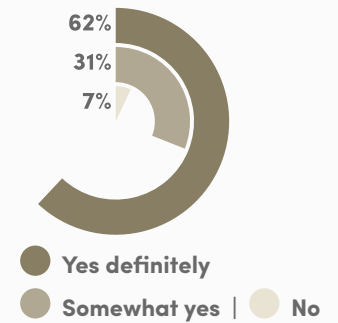
Percentage of total respondents who are eligible for FSM:



Do free school meals have an impact on your child's quality of life?

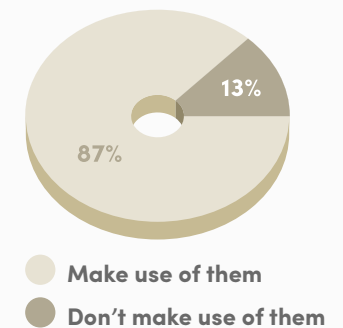
The majority of parents who qualify for free school meals feel that FSM improves quality of life for them and/or their children.

Reasons given for FSM not improving quality of life included small portion sizes meaning pupils are hungry after and 'topping up' by buying more, limited choices available, poor nutritional value of meals served and the free school meal spend not covering the price of a hot school meal.



Of those eligible for means-tested free school meals...

When the 13% of respondents who don't make use of their FSM provision were asked to give more detail, the reasons given were similar to previous years. These include the time it takes to queue for a hot school meal at lunchtime, children not liking the meals on offer, not wanting the school to be aware of individuals receiving benefits, a gap in understanding of how to apply for the process, and some who feel they can manage to pay for their child's school meals.

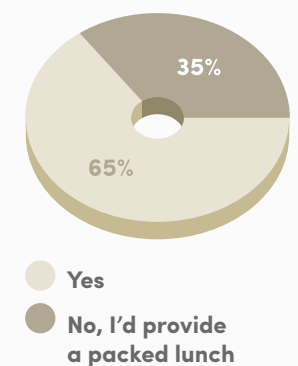


LACA commentary

Free school meals are a vital support to families, enabling children to have a nutritious and balanced hot meal each day. It is reassuring that 87% of families entitled to FSM take up the offer. It is also encouraging that 65% would continue to have meals even if they had to pay for them.

Would you still use school meal provision if you didn't qualify for FSM?

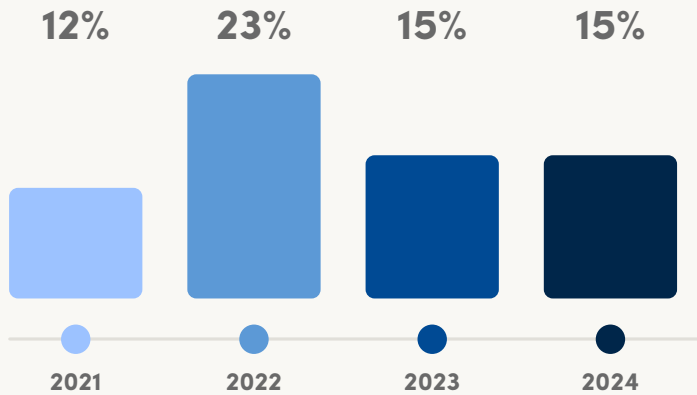
We also found that nearly two-thirds of parents (65%) would still use school meal provision, regardless of whether they qualified for FSM. This is a 1pp increase from the 2023 report.



Allergies & Special Diets

Year-on-year comparison

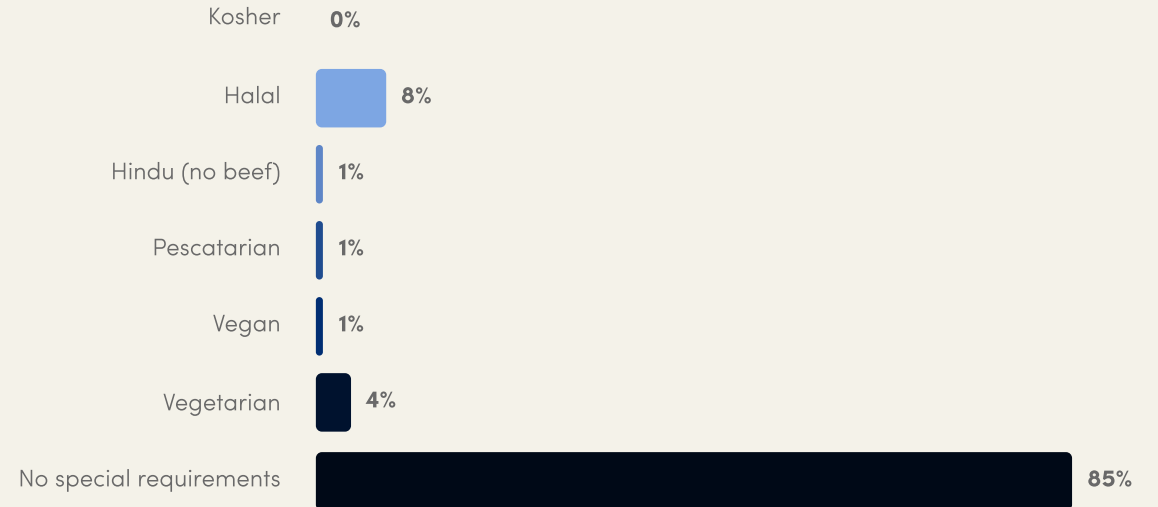
% of pupils with established food allergies:



Percentage of pupils with allergies:

	Yes	No	Other non-FSA recognised
England	5%	93%	2%
N. Ireland	4%	94%	2%
Scotland	5%	94%	2%
Wales	4%	94%	2%
National total	5%	93%	2%

Percentage of pupils with alternative dietary requirements:

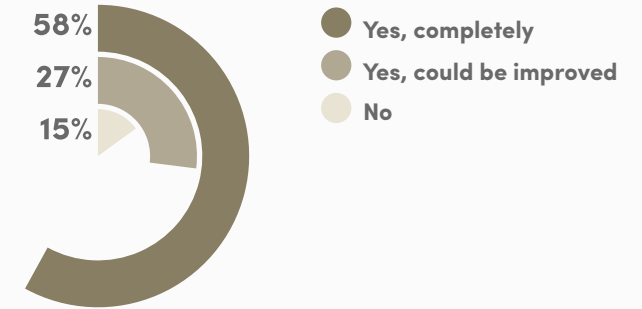


15% of parents surveyed have children with alternative dietary needs, with Halal being the most common amongst the pre-defined needs, accounting for 8% of school children.

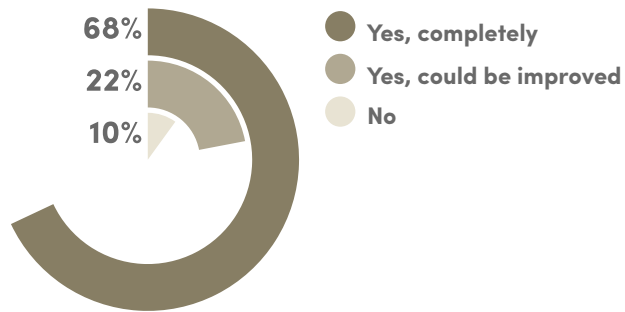
	Kosher	Halal	Hindu (no beef)	Pescatarian	Vegan	Vegetarian
England	0%	9%	1%	1%	1%	4%
NI	0%	1%	0%	1%	0%	1%
Scotland	0%	4%	4%	1%	1%	3%
Wales	3%	5%	1%	1%	1%	3%

Do you feel allergies are managed appropriately by your school?

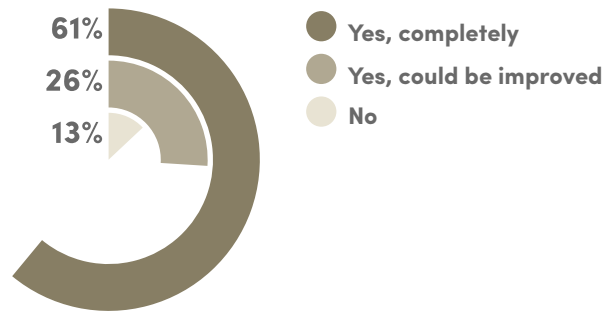
Most parents who have children with allergies feel that their schools manage allergies well, with more than half reporting complete confidence in them. This figure has increased by 7 pp from 51% since 2023, demonstrating that conscientious school caterers are continuing to inspire trust in allergy management.



Respondents with menu visibility and pre-ordering capability:



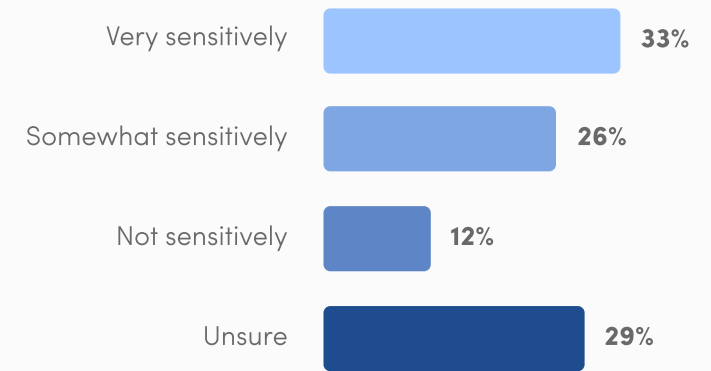
Respondents without menu visibility and pre-ordering capability:



When the above is split by having or not having the ability to pre-order meals (therefore seeing the menu, and depending on the method, the ingredients), 68% of caregivers who can pre-order meals said they feel allergies are managed completely appropriately. This drops to 61% for those without meal pre-ordering options.

Pre-booking options give visibility over diet types and appropriate meals according to the pupils requirements, increasing parents' confidence in choosing school meal provision.

How sensitively are allergies managed by schools?



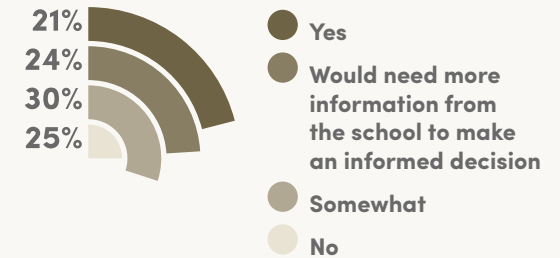
There has been a 5 pp increase from the 2023 survey of respondents who feel allergies are managed very sensitively by schools and school meal providers – 28% to 33%.

Sustainability & Sourcing

Is the sustainability and ethical sourcing of ingredients a factor when choosing to select school meals?

Over 1 in 5 of surveyed parents responded that sustainability and ethical sourcing of food is definitely a factor when choosing school meal provision, with just under a third saying it is a consideration.

24% were open to the idea but would need more information.



Regional breakdown:

	No	Somewhat	Need more information	Yes
England	25%	30%	24%	21%
N. Ireland	31%	28%	25%	16%
Scotland	26%	28%	27%	19%
Wales	24%	29%	26%	20%

New questions for 2024

Almost a third of parents responded that they would be happy to pay slightly more for school meals than they currently do if ingredients were sourced from UK producers.

Do you mind if ingredients are sourced from abroad or would you prefer a UK source?

	Don't know	No I don't mind	Yes I prefer a UK source
England	6%	50%	44%
N. Ireland	6%	45%	49%
Scotland	6%	44%	50%
Wales	6%	44%	50%
National	6%	49%	44%

Would you be happy to pay slightly more than you do currently for a school meal if ingredients were sourced from a UK producer?

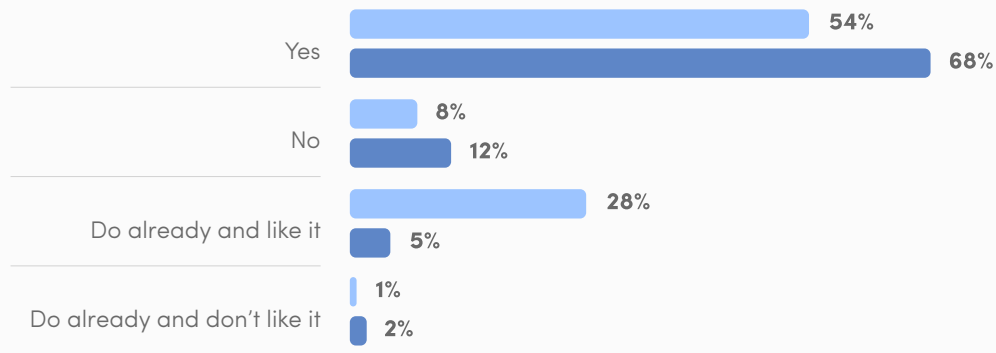
	Don't know	No	Yes
England	27%	43%	30%
N. Ireland	27%	45%	28%
Scotland	28%	35%	37%
Wales	30%	36%	34%
National	27%	42%	31%

Technology

Would parents like to use school meal-related software?

Respondents were asked if they would like to be able to use a system that allowed them or their child to:

- Pre-select meals ahead of time
- View the menu and nutritional content
- See a picture of the food

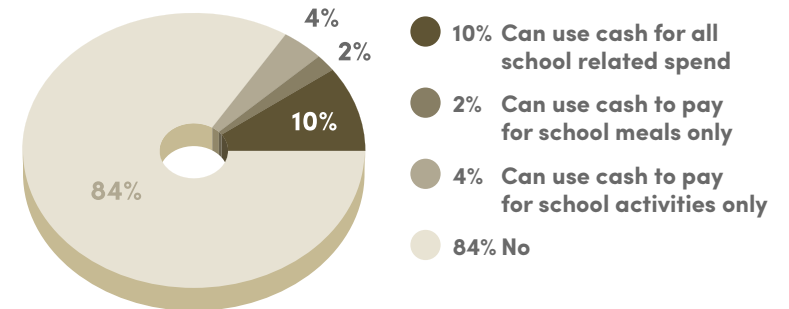


● Primary ● Secondary

The majority of parents across primary and secondary schools said they liked the idea of being able to use a system like this.

Only 5% of secondary school parents currently have the option for them or their child to do this, compared to 68% who said they would like to be able to.

Can surveyed parents still use cash to pay for school-related spend?

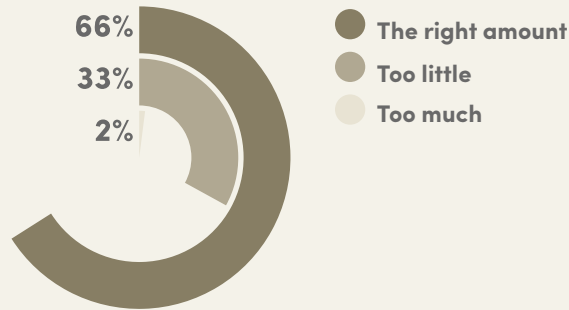


Respondents at schools that allow cash payments were also asked their preferred method of paying for school-related costs:

	A mixture	Cash payments only	Online payments only
England	29%	3%	69%
N. Ireland	41%	4%	55%
Scotland	38%	5%	57%
Wales	33%	4%	63%

School information

How much information do parents get from their school about school meals?



Two-thirds of respondents said they get the right amount of information about school meals from their child's school. However, one in three feel they don't receive enough information.

The number of parents who feel they get the right amount of information from their schools has increased by 1 pp each year since 2022, demonstrating the efforts schools are making to improve communication about school meals with parents and caregivers.

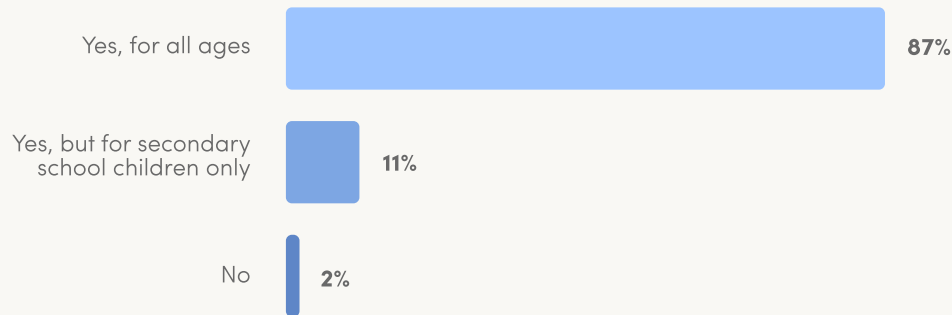
Regional breakdown:

	The right amount	Too little	Too much
England	65%	33%	2%
N. Ireland	68%	31%	1%
Scotland	75%	24%	1%
Wales	66%	33%	1%

Information parents would like their school to provide about school meals:

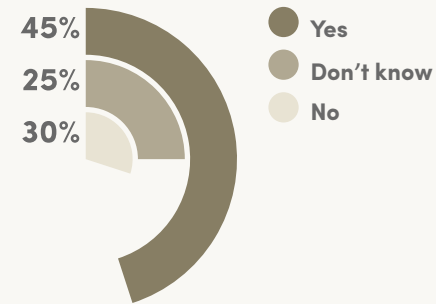
	England	N. Ireland	Scotland	Wales
The menu this week	58%	58%	49%	52%
How healthy eating is promoted to children	25%	22%	25%	24%
The nutritional content of the meals	24%	19%	23%	24%
How caterers work with teachers to educate children about food	12%	8%	13%	12%
Details of the menu today	24%	21%	19%	23%
How healthy eating is made fun	15%	14%	20%	16%
Details of the ingredients used	18%	12%	18%	19%
Information about theme days	15%	12%	18%	16%
Food miles & locally sourced ingredients	12%	10%	15%	14%

Do you think cooking should be on the curriculum?



- The vast majority of parents feel that cooking should be part of the curriculum for children of all ages, with a further 11% saying this should be for secondary children only. This is on par with the results from previous School Meals Reports.
- Just 2% of parents who responded felt that cooking doesn't have a place on the curriculum.

Does your school have a school breakfast provision?



Regional breakdown:

	Don't know	No	Yes
England	16%	32%	52%
N. Ireland	16%	32%	52%
Scotland	22%	36%	42%
Wales	19%	24%	57%

Wales has the highest number of respondents whose school has breakfast provision.


Summary and recommendations

Summary

- 1** School meal uptake is high across the UK, with 87% of pupils having a school meal at least once a week and 59% having school meals every day. Both figures have increased since the 2023 report. School meals continue to be valued by most parents for providing a hot meal for their children and for being convenient.
- 2** The top three factors that would encourage increased school meal uptake are a wider selection of meals, meals being better quality or more appetising, and a lower cost per meal. 41% of parents in the UK are paying more than £2.80 a day on average for their children's school meals.
- 3** The majority of parents across primary and secondary schools said they liked the idea of being able to use a system that allowed them to pre-order meals ahead of time. Only 7% of secondary school parents currently have the option for them or their child to pre-order meals, compared to 68% who would like to be able to.
- 4** 87% of parents who are eligible for free school meals make use of them, which is a 1 pp drop from the 2023 report. 62% stated that they improved their quality of life. 31% of respondents said they felt that FSM doesn't improve their quality of life due to small portion sizes, poor nutritional value and the free school meal spend not covering the cost of a hot school meal.

Recommendations

- 1** Communicate information on school food standards and healthy eating regulations to parents and carers to enable a greater understanding on portion sizes and the nutritional value of school meals. Education catering providers should ensure that the FSM allowance can be used for a hot meal each day.
- 2** Share information with parents and carers on how allergens and special diets are managed in your schools. This will provide reassurance to parents and could help improve meal uptake.
- 3** Introduce meal pre-order systems, which helps ensure that each pupil receives the meal of their choice and encourages communication about food between parents and carers and their children when choosing meals. Digital meal pre-ordering also reduces food wastage, supporting sustainability and helping education caterers to reduce costs.
- 4** Encourage a whole school approach to food, considering areas such as breakfast provision, food waste, local food, cooking activities, nutrition education and sustainability.



The school thoroughly label the food and allergens online on the school meals menu. I feel safe sending my daughter to school knowing she knows what she can and can't eat.

Surveyed parent



Interested in seeing the report for the UK nations?

We will be releasing nation-specific results for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, showing breakdowns for meals taken, improving meal uptake, allergy management and free school meals.

Scan the QR code to register your interest now...



National report from ParentPay, Cypad, BlueRunner and LACA