

# If the government is serious about tackling child poverty, it should extend free school meals

July 24 2024, by Will Baker

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Credit: Pavel Danilyuk from Pexels

The government has created a new ministerial taskforce for its [child poverty strategy](#), led by Work and Pensions secretary Liz Kendall and

Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson. It is urgently needed: 4.3 million children in the UK are [living in poverty](#).

The government has already committed to making sure [free breakfast clubs](#) are available in all primary schools in England.

We know that having a [good breakfast at school](#) can help improve child behavior and readiness to learn, and helps children achieve more at school. The introduction of breakfast clubs for all [primary school children](#) is welcome—but this cannot be the limit of the government's ambitions if it is serious about tackling child poverty and dealing with its consequences. Extending free [school meals](#) in England would be a powerful step here.

One in five children live in [food insecure households](#), and children in the UK are getting sicker and smaller as a result of [poor diet and poverty](#).

The [education system](#) has been left to pick up the pieces of Britain's crumbling public services and counter the country's child poverty and [food insecurity crisis](#). Ongoing research I'm leading suggests that there are now [more food banks](#) inside of schools than outside of them.

If the new government is serious about addressing [child poverty](#), hardship and food insecurity, school meals and food need to be near the top of the policy agenda. None of the government's missions can be achieved if the country's children are hungry, poor and experiencing the harsh realities of food insecurity.

## **Taking action**

Good food at school makes children's [lives better](#). Let's look at some options available to the government.

In England, schools currently receive funding of [£2.53 per meal](#). However, the per meal funding rate has lost value in real terms [over the last decade](#)—16% between 2014 and 2023 (when the funding rate per meal was £2.41). This makes it [incredibly challenging](#) for schools to provide good quality, nutritious and culturally appropriate meals.

The devolved governments of Wales and Scotland provide more money per free school meals at a [much higher rate](#): £3.20 and £3.30 respectively. The government should increase school meal funding for schools in England to, at a minimum, account for the impact of inflation over the last decade.

Secondly, the government should look at expanding the eligibility for free school meals further. One of the primary purposes of free school meals is to provide children living in poverty a meal when they come to school. But the link between need and provision is broken and needs to be fixed.

Currently, around [1.9 million children](#) are eligible for means-tested free school meals in England. But 900,000 more children live in poverty but [do not qualify](#) for free school meals. This is largely a result of restrictive eligibility criteria.

For example, families in receipt of universal credit benefit payments, but who have a [household income of over £7,400](#), do not qualify for free school meals. This means that [1.7 million children](#) in families eligible for universal credit miss out. Expanding free school meals to include these children would cost [£1.5 billion per year](#). But the long-term [economic and social benefits](#) of this investment dramatically outweigh the upfront costs.

## **Equal opportunities**

Finally, and more ambitiously, the government should consider expanding universal free school meals provision to all primary school age children. [In Scotland](#), all children aged five to ten get free school lunches, and free school meals for all primary school children are being [rolled out in Wales](#). In London, mayor Sadiq Khan made extending universal free school meals for all primary school aged children central to his reelection campaign in the capital. The [policy, he argued](#), would "give the next generation a chance."

This means that primary school age children in Bridget Phillipson's Sunderland constituency—an area with a [high rate of child poverty](#)—do not have access to universal free school meals but those in the prime minister's London constituency of Holborn and St Pancras do.

Labor MPs have shown support in the past for [universal free school meals](#). A [range of organizations](#) have forcefully made the case for [extending free school meals](#) across the country and for [improving school food](#) more generally. Expanding access to free school meals is also a [popular policy among voters](#).

As with any policy, there are questions of efficiency, equity, trade-offs and what the [country's finances allow](#). However, policies like this send a powerful message about the sort of society we are and want to be—a society that takes care of all its children and brings them together as equals to share a meal at school.

Extending free school meals coverage offers a path to a brighter future for children—and would be a powerful way to counter the division and discord that has characterized much of the last 14 years.

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