

A photograph of several young girls in school uniforms standing in a line at a school canteen. They are holding green trays and looking towards the camera with smiles. The background shows a modern school interior with large windows and yellow accents.

**VEGPOWER**

## Primary school meals: Who decides?

Market Insight Report  
Edition 6: August 2024

Understanding the household  
decision-making dynamics of  
primary school meal uptake.

# Foreword

As a [recent report from the Food Foundation](#)<sup>1</sup> highlights, children in the UK are facing a double burden of overnutrition alongside undernutrition, with obesity rates among 10-11 year olds increasing by 30% since 2006 and the height of five year olds falling since 2013. Food eaten during the school day makes up nearly a fifth of primary age children's diets in the UK. This presents a huge opportunity for schools and school caterers to support the improvements to children's diets that are drastically needed, ensuring they have the nutrition to grow healthily and the energy to learn and thrive throughout the school day.

[Several studies](#)<sup>2</sup> have highlighted the superior nutritional quality of school meals compared to packed lunches. This underscores the importance of promoting school meal uptake as a strategy for instilling healthy dietary habits from an early age and tackling childhood obesity. Yet, a puzzling trend persists: even when cost is taken out of the equation — as is the case for those eligible for free school meals — many families choose not to claim these meals, opting instead for less healthy alternatives. This report delves into the heart of this issue examining the human factors behind these decisions. Who in the family decides whether a child eats a school meal or a packed lunch? What drives their choice? And most importantly, how can those in the school food system address these barriers to increase uptake?



**Who decides?**

**What drives their choice?**

**How can we address barriers?**

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*This report was co-funded by Nesta and prepared by Veg Power - the report is not an expression of Nesta's views. Nesta is the UK's innovation agency for social good. Nesta design, test and scale solutions to society's biggest problems. Their three missions are to give every child a fair start, help people live healthy lives and create a sustainable future where the economy works for both people and the planet.*

## CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Importance of School Meals	6
<b>About School Meals</b>	<b>8</b>
Around the UK	9
School Meal Funding	12
Measuring Uptake	13
Frontline View: A London School	14
Frontline View: A Welsh School	15
Frontline View: A Welsh Caterer	16
<b>Research Findings</b>	<b>17</b>
Research Methodology	18
Frequency	19
Decisions	22
Barriers	27
Correlation with Vegetables	31
Overcoming Barriers	32
<b>Conclusion &amp; Recommendations</b>	<b>35</b>
Conclusions	36
Recommendations	37
Case Study: Nourish Catering in London	40
Credits	42
References	43

# Executive Summary

There is near universal acknowledgement that Free School Meals (FSMs) are good for children's wellbeing and good for society at large. The benefits are most pronounced among less affluent families and include reduced food insecurity; improved nutrition and health; better school attendance rates; enhanced academic attainment; and (based on a landmark study in Sweden) increased lifetime earnings potential.<sup>3</sup>

To date, much of the debate has focused on food standards, funding and access. With varying policies in each of the four nations – and indeed between different parts of England – the situation at present is a postcode lottery. We are calling for this to be rectified as a matter of urgency, with FSMs being made universally available to primary school children across the UK. Food standards should also be updated, and funding increased to at least £3 per meal.

However, another important issue needs to be recognised. Even when school meals are free, there is a sizable minority of children who simply don't want to eat them. We estimate that at least 12% of primary school children entitled to FSMs reject them outright. A further 10% - 15% of eligible children will opt out on any given day. In other words: every lunchtime, 25 - 30% of children who could be benefiting from a FSM are choosing to avoid it.

## Why is this?

That's the question we set out to answer in this report. We wanted to investigate three topics in particular: who decides whether a child should have a school meal or not? What influences these decisions? And what can be done to change them?

Accordingly, we commissioned research in March – April 2024 amongst 3,000 parents and carers and their primary school aged children, all references in this report are to that research unless otherwise stated.



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**25 – 30%**  
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**CHOOSING TO  
AVOID THEM**



## KEY FINDINGS

### Consumption of school meals

- Across primary school age groups, average consumption is 3.1 school meals per week. This varies widely by region and demographic, with children in families where Household Income (HHI) is between £30,000 and £60,000 eating notably fewer school meals than other income groups.
- FSMs have a clear impact on uptake. Among children who eat a school meal at least once a week, those who are entitled to FSMs eat an average of 4.2 meals per week against 3.2 meals per week if the parent has to pay.
- 16% of primary school children never eat a school meal. Even at age 5, the figure is 11%. This increases to 25% by age 11.

### Who decides on school meals?

- 39% of decisions are made jointly; 32% are made by the parent / carer; and 28% are made by the child. These percentages are not affected by whether meals are free or not.
- Children are significantly more likely to eat school meals, and eat them more often, when the parent or carer says s/he is the sole decision-maker.

### What influences school meal decisions?

- When asked what stopped them from having a school meal more often, 40% of children said they preferred a packed lunch.

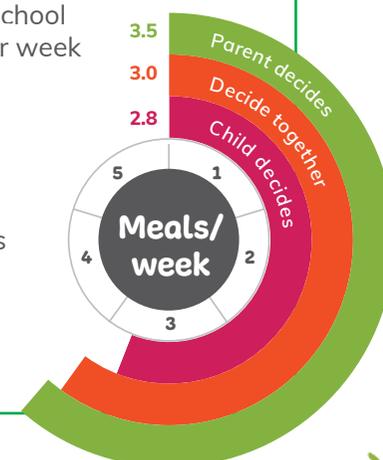
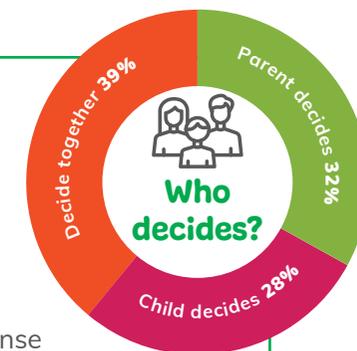


Other significant barriers included: a resistance to experimentation; how school meals 'look'; a perceived lack of variety; and the fact that their friends don't eat school meals.

- Parents and carers cited similar barriers. However, among those who had to pay, 23% referenced expense as a reason for their child not having more school meals. In families where HHI was £20,000 - £30,000, this figure rose to 26%.
- Among parents / carers who claim to be the sole decision-maker and whose child never has a school meal, 50% think school meals are expensive.
- The likelihood of a child eating school meals, and eating them more often, is significantly greater when the parent or carer claims their child eats 2 – 3 handfuls of vegetables per day.

### What would encourage greater frequency of consumption?

- 38% of parents / carers who currently pay said FSMs would persuade them and their child to eat more school meals.
- 43% of parents / carers whose child never has a school meal would be persuaded to have at least one per week if meals were free.
- However, FSMs will not be sufficient in isolation. To drive greater frequency, parents and carers also want more variety (31%); more appetising presentation (27%); and better-quality ingredients (24%). There were also calls to make school meal occasions more social and more of an interactive 'event'.





## RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

**1** FSMs should be universally available to primary school children across the UK. If this cannot be implemented immediately, eligibility should be dramatically extended to include lower and lower-middle earners. Given the benefits at both the individual and the societal level, it is hard to think of a better investment.

**2** 'Per meal' funding should be increased to a minimum of £3.00, index linked and ringfenced. We must give caterers the opportunity to serve the food our children deserve. This additional money should in-part be directed to better-quality ingredients and higher standards, including removing the requirement to offer meat and a dessert at every meal and replacing it with an obligation to include at least two portions and two different vegetables per serving. There should also be support for 'water-only' schools.

**3** Our research makes clear that more must be done to drive demand as well as supply. School lunchtimes should be social, culture-building experiences that children don't want to miss. Many catering companies understand the need to offer 'good fun' as well as 'good fuel'...but that's hard to do when margins are under extreme pressure. In parallel, emphasis must be placed on offering greater variety and choice (perhaps through salad and pasta bars), and on developing mechanisms that give primary school children a say in menu design.



### A Qualitative Perspective

Robust data is an invaluable asset, and we believe our research findings provide important new insights. However, numbers alone can only tell part of the story.

Veg Power works closely with over 5,000 primary schools and dozens of catering companies. We have always placed great store on their opinions and feedback. Accordingly, this report begins and ends by capturing first-hand experiences from the 'school meals frontline'.

# Importance of School Meals

For many school children living in the UK, their free school meal is often their only hot, nutritious meal each day. With 3.5 million school children living in food insecure households<sup>4</sup>, universal free school meals (UFSM) would provide multiple benefits to children's health and remove stigma, with all children enjoying equal access to nutritious food.

There is growing evidence that UFSMs positively impact children's health. Research by University of Essex<sup>5</sup> has shown that, on average, the UFSMs policy reduced prevalence of obesity by 9.3% among Reception children and 5.6% among children in Year 6. The policy also supported better educational outcomes.<sup>5</sup> We also know that a nutritionally balanced school meal is the healthier option, with only 1.6% of packed lunches, meeting the government's school food standards.<sup>2</sup>

FSMs are good for the economy too. In 2022, PWC's cost-benefit analysis found that for every £1 invested in school food returns £1.71, and when considering wider benefits, FSM could generate £99.5 billion for the economy over 20 years<sup>6</sup>. Investing in FSM not only alleviates financial pressure on families during the current cost of living crisis, but offers a long-term economic return on investment.

And yet, despite the clear benefits of FSMs and the success of the infant FSMs policy, we are still

means-testing families, entrenching access to good nutrition into the benefits system, when we should be seeing FSMs as an investment in children's health and well-being. In England, families with a HHI of more than £7,400 (excluding benefits and after tax) are deemed too well-off to receive access to FSM. This means that 900,000 children who are living in poverty are not eligible for a free school meal.<sup>7</sup>



A recent report published by School Food Matters revealed that schools across England are dipping into their own budgets to ensure that all children get a nutritious meal during their school day. According to a poll of 10,000 teachers, four in ten senior leaders reported that their school has been providing a free meal to those who do not qualify, with that number rising to 51% in more food insecure areas. A quarter of teachers said their school has written off school meal debt this year, and 24% said they are now providing a food bank to support families. More than 4,000 food banks are now operating in schools across the

country.<sup>8</sup> This supports the evidence outlined in this report that cost remains a major barrier to uptake of school meals.

Crucially, children themselves want access to free, nutritious meals at school. A Childwise survey revealed that one in three children who do not currently get a free meal at school say they would like to have one.<sup>9</sup> Teachers also overwhelmingly agree that a nutritious school meal improves behaviour, attainment and attendance.<sup>10</sup>

The availability of FSM varies significantly across the four UK nations. In Scotland and Wales, all primary school children are set to receive FSM by the end of 2024. However, in Northern Ireland and England, FSM are largely means-tested, and hundreds and thousands of children are missing out on a healthy, hot meal during their time at school.

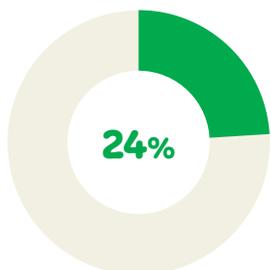
Every child, no matter where they live, should have fully funded access to a hot and nutritious meal during their time at school. As the increasing evidence indicates, investing in FSM can unlock a world of potential for the next generation and should therefore be made a top priority for the government.

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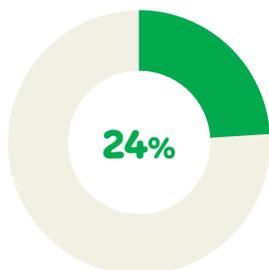
Stephanie Slater, Founder and Chief Executive, School Food Matters

Has your school taken any of the following measures to mitigate pupil hunger this academic year?

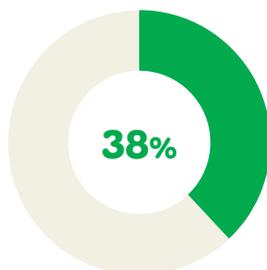
Providing a food bank



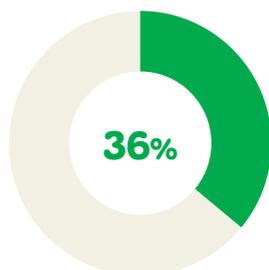
Writing off school meal debt



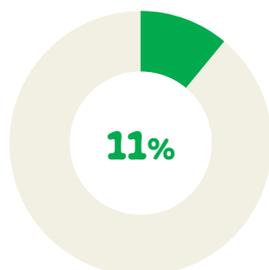
Free school meals to non FSM pupils



Offering food parcels



Not needed to introduce measure



**Source:** School Food Matters: Schools dipping into their own budgets to stop children going hungry, available [here](#). Question answered by 2,513 teachers. Results weighted to reflect national teacher and school demographics.



# About School Meals

Primary school meal provision is fragmented across the UK. This section explains the status quo and shares the experience of those working in schools as they increase provision of free meals.



# Around the UK

## ENGLAND



**Universal Infant  
Free School  
Meals + mixed in  
different local  
authorities**

.....  
Myles Bremner, CEO,  
Bremner & Co.

It seems that school food rarely veers far from the headlines. We have much to celebrate of course; school food has come a long way in recent years, especially since the School Food Plan was launched all the way back in 2013. Every day, millions of kids tuck into a great school meal in one of England's 20,000 schools. Our heroic workforce of over 80,000 cooks and chefs perform herculean tasks to dish up meals that meet food standards, fit within tight budgets and meet discerning palates.

It's frustrating then to have a patchwork and fragmented school food system – which means too many children miss out on all the benefits that a great school meal brings. We have a disconnect across England that means not all schools are able to ensure equitable access to food, deliver consistent quality meals, or make the economics of school food work.

Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 pupils are universally free in all government funded schools and all children are entitled to a FSM where they meet strict, and low, benefit or income requirements. Beyond that it is a postcode lottery. Why should all primary kids in London get a free meal, but those in Cornwall, or Cumbria, don't? Second, why do some forward thinking Councils, like Blackpool, or Southwark, introduce great quality assurance schemes to help schools monitor and audit the quality of their meals, whilst other Councils don't? And third, why do some areas of the country get £3 to fund a meal (well done to the London Mayor) but other schools have to rely on £2.53 – no way near enough to fund a decent meal.

## LONDON



**Universal  
Primary Free  
School Meals**

.....  
Health, Children and  
Young Londoners Unit,  
Greater London Authority

For the first time ever, children at state primary schools in every borough in London are enjoying free lunches at school every day – helping families struggling with the cost of living and ensuring children don't go hungry. More than 43m meals have been funded in the 2023-24 academic year, providing a healthy meal to up to 287,000 children daily.

We know there are many tangible benefits for children and their families. In London, we've seen that providing all children with FSMs improves financial and psychological security for parents, improves nutrition and school engagement, reduces stigma, improves relationships between families and schools, changes eating habits and helps create a richer school life.

The Mayor has provided all councils with funding of £2.65 per meal in 2023/24 and increased this to £3 in 2024/25, to account for food inflation next year. This is higher than the amount they receive from Government for universal infant free school meals (UIFSMs), who previously increased its funding from £2.41 to £2.53 per meal following the Mayor's unprecedented intervention.

The Mayor and officers have worked closely with boroughs and schools throughout policy development and implementation to shape the policy and to support them to deliver these meals. These partnerships are central to the success of the scheme.

## Primary school meals: Who decides?

### SCOTLAND



#### Universal Free School Meals P1-P5

In conversation with  
Chris Ross, Head of  
Catering of Edinburgh  
Council & National Chair  
– ASSIST FM

Currently FSMs are available to all Scottish pupils in Early Years (nurseries), Primary 1 – Primary 5 and all Special Schools. The provision began with P1-3s in January 2015 and was extended to include Early Years pupils in 2019, followed by P4 in August 2021 and P5 and all Special Schools in January 2022. All Local Authorities (LAs) reported a significant uptake of 80/90%. The LA Caterers continue to see the benefits of established good nutrition habits in younger aged pupils as they move through their academic journey. The uptake of FSMs varies by LA but the national average is between 70-80%.

The Scottish Government is committed to delivering all primary aged pupils a free lunch by 2026. This will mean all children in Primary 6 and 7 will also receive FSMs. The extension will begin with pupils who are in receipt of Scottish Child Payment by 2025, then all P6 and 7 in 2026.

As seen in the data, the uptake of school meals is increasing and UFSMs is a key driver of this. By implementing the changes in a phased approach (i.e. each year group cluster has gone live at a different time rather than all pupils at the same time) it has allowed the LAs to plan and implement the key stages of the expansion as smoothly as possible.

The major challenge is ensuring appropriate levels of capital funding are generated by the LAs as this will be vital to the expansion programme. Investing in larger kitchens and dining halls is key to the UFSM delivering upon Scotland's Good Food Nation Ambitions. The LAs are working with the Scottish Government to help achieve this.

Scotland has the most rigorous school food standards of any devolved nation (Scottish government policy), resulting in school food being inspected and monitored for nutritional content. This alongside driving a clear baseline for all LAs also means they are spending a considerable amount more for each plate of food in comparison to the other devolved nations.

### WALES



#### Universal Primary Free School Meals

UFSMs for primary school aged children in Wales started with the youngest pupils in September 2022. All primary school children and more than 6,000 nursery-age pupils attending a maintained school will be eligible for FSMs by September 2024.

Most local authorities have made FSMs in primary available well ahead of the deadline, others are rolling out more slowly as facilities, equipment and staff allow.

A rate of £2.90 per pupil per meal was originally set, but when the Welsh government recognised that encouraging local councils to use locally sourced food was proving to exceed the budget, it undertook a review and raised the amount to £3.20 in January 2024.

## Primary school meals: Who decides?

### NORTHERN IRELAND



### Universal Primary Free School Meals

In conversation with Stephen Briggs, Head of Service - Catering, Education Authority

In Northern Ireland, this academic year (23/24), the Education Authority served over 150,000 meals per day to children across 1,032 school settings.

Children are entitled to FSMs if their parent(s)/ guardian(s) are in receipt of one of the following benefits: Income Support; Income Based Jobseeker's Allowance; Income Related Employment and Support Allowance; Guarantee Element of State Pension Credit; Child Tax Credit or Working Tax Credit with an annual taxable income of £16,190 or less; Universal Credit and have net household earnings not exceeding £14,000 per year. From the 1st of September 2024 an interim change to £15,000 will be in place. Children are also entitled if they are an Asylum Seeker supported by the Home Office Asylum Support Assessment Team (ASAT); or has a statement of special educational needs and is designated to require a special diet.

The uptake of FSMs varies across the year groups with 72,000 FSMs provided each day which equates to 76% of eligible children receiving their free meal. If we look at the % of FSM uptake it ranges from 80% for nursery and primary schools, 72% for special schools and 70% for post primary school.

To support an increase in uptake we have introduced new menu offers and implemented a marketing and branding strategy which has led to an increase in FSM uptake by 2.6% (23/24 period).

The Department of Education NI are currently working on a review of FSMs. We believe that increasing availability to FSMs would lead to an

increase beyond the current 76% uptake, but it is difficult to predict.

The major challenges/barriers to increasing uptake are the additional financial cost to deliver the additional meals and the capital cost to prepare for such a change. On top of this there are staffing and infrastructure considerations. Recruitment within the catering and hospitality industry remains challenging and school kitchens and dining room facilities would need to adapt to suit an increase in numbers.



# School Meal Funding

School meals budgets can be baffling. For school meals funded by the state the rate paid varies from nation to nation and even between local authorities.

Currently English schools outside London receive £2.53 per pupil per meal (London's funding will rise to £3.00 from September), while Northern Irish schools are on £2.60, Welsh schools on £3.20 and Scottish schools receive £3.30. On top of that some schools may top up that budget to ensure an excellent meal whereas others may purchase meals below that rate in order to keep the balance to meet the other costs facing the school.

Those not entitled to a free meal can buy them, rates are determined by the school or local authority and vary from below £2.50 to over £3.00. The [Parent Pay 2024 survey](#) shows that 41% pay over £2.80.<sup>14</sup>

These rates have grown at 10% or less over the last five years. Whereas the cost of ingredients has increased by over 50%, and then there's labour and energy. It has become increasingly difficult for caterers to deliver a good meal inside the budget. Many caterers have been forced to cut back to minimum food standards, 77% of LACA (Local Authority Catering Association) members have had to change their menus, whilst 26% have had to reduce choice on the menu<sup>22</sup>. Many are also reducing the value added work which does so much to engage kids, parents and school leadership in good food. We have schools so desperate for money they just want the cheapest catering provider. The whole system is a race to the bottom.

That's why LACA which represents over 80% of school catering, is calling on the government to standardise school meal funding across all four UK nations at a minimum funding level of £3 per meal per child, index linked and ring-fenced for school meal provision.

**LACA is calling on the government to standardise school meal funding across all four UK nations**



# Measuring Uptake

## What is the uptake of Free School Meals?

UFSMs are a cause worth fighting for – but we need to remember that universal provision is only one side of the equation. To maximise the benefits, uptake must also be as close to universal as possible.

What do we know about adoption rates among those entitled to a FSM in primary schools? There's a lot of data out there, but it's not easy to get a clear line of sight. There are issues in terms of the definition of 'uptake' (are we counting meals ordered or meals served?), and in exactly what's being measured. Some research focuses on all school meals; others solely on FSMs.

At the top end of estimates, the latest [Schools Census in England](#) reports that 87.4% of infant pupils (i.e. those in Reception to Year 2 when all are eligible) had a FSM on the day of the census.<sup>11</sup> However, since these numbers are used to allocate funding, we need to treat them with a little caution.

The Scottish Government conducted a [snapshot survey in 2023](#). Among primary school pupils registered for free meals and present on the day of the research, it found that 72% took advantage of their eligibility.<sup>12</sup> [Data from Welsh Government](#) suggests that uptake of UFSMs was 70% in May 2023 (this figure only includes those newly eligible for free school meals through

UPFSMs, not those previously eligible for FSMs through qualifying benefits).<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the most comprehensive picture comes from ParentPay Group, Cypad, BlueRunner and LACA. Surveying over 200,000 parents of primary and secondary school children across the four nations for their [2024 School Meals Report](#)<sup>14</sup>, they found that 87% of those eligible for FSM used them at least sometimes (a one percentage point drop from 2023).



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**25 – 30%**

of the children who could be  
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**CHOOSING TO AVOID**

The report also noted that: “There was a slight decrease to 73% in FSM-eligible respondents choosing school meal provision every day, compared to 79% in 2023.” This trend appeared particularly marked in Scotland, with just 65% of eligible pupils choosing a FSM every day.

Again, we need to be a little cautious here. The sampling method is not stated in the report, and as ParentPay provides a platform through which parents can order school meals, this finding may reflect an inherent sampling bias.

Pulling these different data points together, a consensus view begins to emerge. Of those entitled to FSMs in England, at least 12% will reject them outright – even under the favourable circumstances of Schools Census Day. This figure is likely to be higher in Wales and Scotland where eligibility is higher. A further 10% - 15% of primary school children who are eligible for a FSM will opt out of having one on any given day.

**In summary:** every lunchtime, 25 – 30% of the children who could be benefiting from a FSM are choosing to avoid it.

To find out why this might be, we asked two schools and a caterer to share their experience from the frontline. But before getting to that, we need to highlight one final - and rather worrying - piece to the jigsaw.

[Policy in Practice](#)<sup>15</sup> has calculated that a vast number of legitimate claims for FSMs are simply never made. Across Great Britain, it puts the figure for the current year at 471,000. That translates to £231 million of unclaimed benefits, at an average loss of £490 per missed claim.

## FRONTLINE VIEW: A London School

FSMs are incredibly important to our school and our community. The meals themselves are at the heart of a wider food package that provides vital support to our families. In addition to school meals our families have access to breakfast clubs, food banks, a fruit and veg scheme within the school and food packages delivered directly to homes. For some of our children, our school lunches are the only hot meal they will eat all day.

### Extension of the programme

FSMs have been available to all our pupils and across London since the start of last academic year (September 2023). While our school community has been benefitting from the extension of the FSM programme, many others across the country will still be struggling. From our experience, we know that this provision has substantially relieved the pressure on families. Particularly those families who are on the cusp of meeting the threshold (household income < £7,400 per year after tax and not including benefits) to receive them. To qualify, our staff would enter the family's National Insurance number into the system and prior to the extension, every few weeks we had parents asking us to check if they were now eligible for them. We have also seen a trend towards a return to school meals for the KS2 children (who now qualify for them due to the extension of the programme) and were previously bringing in a packed lunch. We know this switch will benefit our children as school meals are nutritionally-balanced, which can be

difficult to achieve with a packed lunch regardless of your financial situation. All-in-all, we are delighted that more support has been given to our families and the children will benefit from a health and education perspective.

### Supporting uptake

Despite the provision of FSM for all pupils, we did have some parents who were reluctant to change from packed lunches. Parents informed us they didn't think their child was getting enough food as the catering companies are provided with funding for the same portion size, regardless of the age of the child. Parents were also worried that their child might not eat the food available and would remain hungry.

**We know that this provision has substantially relieved the pressure on families.**

To help increase uptake we implemented a range of activities. Firstly, we ran an assembly on the topic of school food at the beginning of the 2023 academic year and invited interested pupils to join our School Food Steering Group. They were tasked with helping to improve the meals and now have the responsibility of selecting the weekly menu rather than our school administration team. The group also shared feedback to the chef on behalf of the wider school community to help make

improvements that would encourage more children to enjoy their school food. Interestingly, from this I have noticed that our pupils are more adventurous than I expected – in terms of ingredients and flavour. We also researched any foods or ingredients they were not familiar with to help with menu selection. Our chef has also played a key role in encouraging our pupils to try new choices. When something new is on the menu she offers a small amount as a taster. As a school we also run TastEd as part of our PHSE and as a result of this, they are familiar with trying new things.

In addition to the 'braver' choices, we always have the staple of pasta and tomato sauce as the fail-safe option which is enjoyed particularly by the younger children at our school. It is important to us, there is something available for all pupils so the meal is eaten and the benefits gained.

To showcase our school food to parents we invited them in to have a 'lunch date' with their children on Valentine's Day. The feedback from parents was really positive and has helped increase uptake.

This is just a whistle stop tour of how our school is maximising the provision of FSM. We believe our pupils and families are benefitting and it is one less thing for stressed and anxious parents to worry about.

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**In conversation with the Assistant Headteacher,  
Henry Fawcett Primary School, Kennington, London**

## FRONTLINE VIEW: A Welsh School

Deri Primary School participated in 'count me in' month in January 2024 with the support of Nesta.

During this month all children had a FSM even if they usually had packed lunch. All children had a meal of their choice and tried it. They brought along a packed lunch too just in case they did not like it. There was very little push back from parents doing it this way. However, all children who normally have packed lunch ate a lot of the food and gave positive feedback. This project encouraged all children to try all the food on offer which has resulted in more children having FSMs on a regular basis even now.

Unfortunately, we still have a hardcore of children bringing packed lunches regularly but this is only about 7% of pupils. I would say the ones who have remained packed lunch are very fussy eaters. The ambition for our school was that all pupils were having a healthy, balanced meal everyday and avoiding the common pitfalls of packed lunches which are high sugar, salt and fat content foods.

*UFSMs has had a positive impact on our school community. There is a greater sense of equity and the stigma around FSMs has been removed. It has been great to see all children experiencing new food together.*

I have seen the impact of the introduction of FSMs on parents encouraging their children to have a school meal. We have had great success with nursery and reception children taking up FSMs as it is recommended by the school and an expected part of the school day and very much part of our healthy schools initiative.

The downside of the FSMs on offer is that they are planned as a set meal e.g. protein, carbohydrates and vegetables, however, when the children get to the counter, they are choosing unbalanced and unhealthy combinations e.g. pasta and noodles and potatoes or pizza and pasta and meatballs but no vegetables.

Going forwards to tackle childhood obesity the Welsh Government need to intervene and only offer set meals to ensure a balanced diet is being consumed. It would be wonderful if we could follow the French guidance and encourage good food habits and etiquette around school dinners where pupils have time to savour their healthy food, promoting good social skills and habits for life.

UFSMs has had a positive impact on our school community. There is a greater sense of equity and the stigma around FSMs has been removed. It has been great to see all children experiencing new food together.

---

Susan Martin, Headteacher Deri Primary School, Caerphilly.



## FRONTLINE VIEW: A Welsh Caterer

In our area of South Wales, we have experienced a 10% increase in the uptake of school meals since the roll out of UFSM. Prior to this, the uptake was 56% now it is 65%. I believe the introduction of UFSM has made a huge difference to the working poor who are struggling with the cost of living. Prior to the availability of UFSM, the cost of each meal was £2.30 per child per day which soon added up for families with multiple children. Uptake might also have been impacted by many believing that the packed lunch was cheaper than a school meal. This is often a misconception as the costs of lunch box components would be hidden in the weekly family shop.

The introduction of UPFSM meals started in December 2022 and they were fully rolled out by February 2024 ahead of schedule. Despite this, we still have around 35% of families not taking up the free meals offer even when the most popular dishes are on offer. For some they have special dietary requirements but for many children they have never or rarely had a "real" meal in line with school standards and are not used to eating with cutlery or at a table.

Our most popular meal served is sausage, chips, beans and peas with a 81% uptake and least popular is Chilli Con Carne at around 70%. To help increase uptake further, we are looking at the uptake and waste data and consulting with the children to tailor the menu to their preferred choices whilst maintaining standards. We are hopeful this will also reduce waste, while

increasing uptake. In addition to this, themes days such as St David's Day, Christmas and Easter always worked well as a "sales pitch" to encourage extra children to have school meals.

The roll out of UPFSM has been very challenging for the catering teams, but we are very proud of our achievement. Staff recruitment has been

a challenge, along with logistics from enough tables, kitchen space and equipment and even sufficient electricity capacity. Capital funding from the Welsh Government has helped but unfortunately it can't solve all the problems.

*Fairyal Pabani, Catering Manager in Merthyr Tydfil*



We have experienced a 10% increase in uptake of school meals since the roll out of UFSM

# Research Findings

Veg Power's annual survey of 3,000 parents of primary school aged children and their child is now in its sixth consecutive year. As well as exploring the impact of Veg Power's work and the state of veg consumption we explore other issues. This year we are keen to support the effective roll out of FSMs by better understanding how that decision is made in family homes and what's driving their choices.



# Research Methodology

There's a compelling case that school meals should be free to all primary school children. It is good for their individual health and wellbeing, and good for society at large.

At the same time, we need to recognise that although cost is a key barrier for many, it isn't the only factor blocking uptake. As the figures show, making school meals free does not lead to universal adoption. Far from it.

To move the discussion forward, we need a deeper understanding of these barriers. It's an area where high quality data is thin on the ground. Accordingly, we commissioned a large-scale national research survey of 3,000 parents and their primary school-aged children in March/April 2024 to explore four key areas:

- 1** Among primary school children, what is the average frequency of eating school meals and how does it vary by region and demographic?
- 2** Who in a household decides on whether a child eats school meals or not?
- 3** For both parents / carers and children, what are the main reasons for rejecting school meals?
- 4** What would be the most effective ways to drive the uptake of school meals amongst parents / carers and children?

WHO?



Parents / carers with children aged 5 – 11  
Both the parents / carers and the children participated

HOW?



Mobile compatible online survey, lasting approximately 10 minutes

HOW MANY?



National sample of 3,000 parents / carers and their primary school-aged child

WHEN?



March-April 2024



# FREQUENCY: Child's Age

## How often do primary school children eat school meals?

Across all age groups, average consumption is 3.1 school meals per week. This figure declines sharply as children get older, with pupils aged 11 eating (on average) one less school meal per week than those aged 5 or 6.

However, there's no such thing as an 'average' child and behaviours differ significantly within age groups. At age 5, 11% of children never have a school meal and 6% have only one a week. By the time they're 11, these numbers have jumped to 25% and 11% respectively.

What about those entitled to FSMs? As we saw earlier, some children will never eat a school meal regardless of whether it's free or not. But our research shows that FSMs have a significant impact on frequency among those who will.



**Average school meals per WEEK**

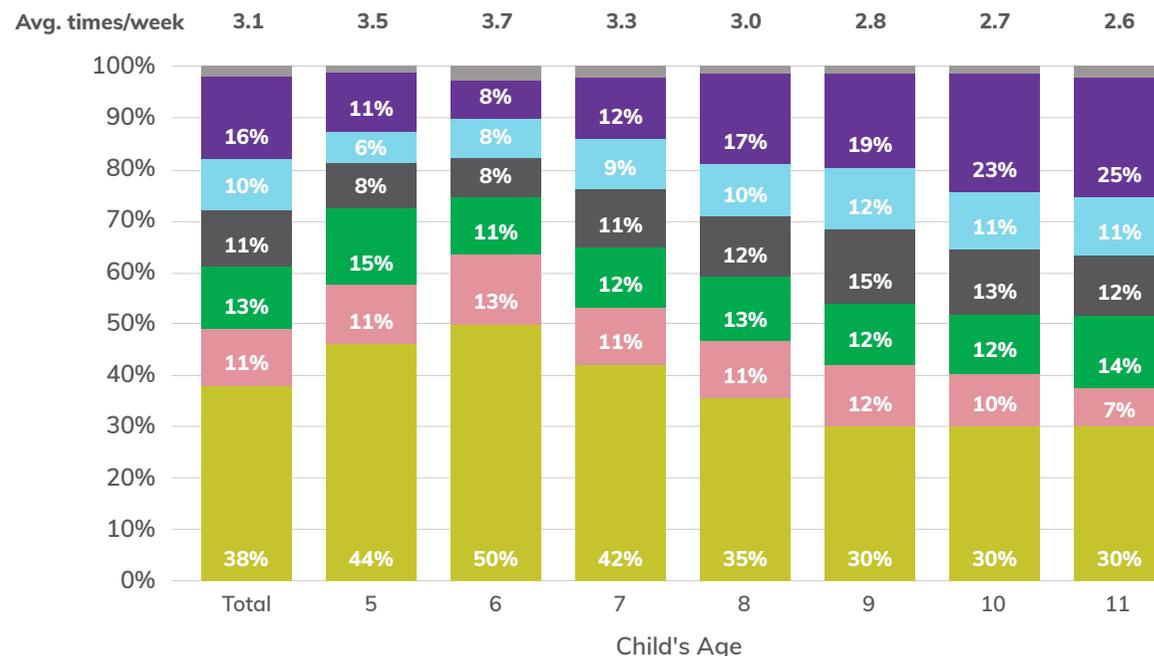
Among those who eat a school meal at least once a week, children who are entitled to a free meal eat 4.2 meals per week on average against 3.2 meals per week if the parent has to pay.



**16% NEVER eat a school meal**

### Uptake of school meals by age of child

■ Not available at school 
 ■ Never 
 ■ Once/week 
 ■ 2 times/week 
 ■ 3 times/week 
 ■ 4 times/week 
 ■ 5 times/week



# FREQUENCY: Regional & Demographic

## Average frequency varies widely by region and demographic.

The Greater London Authority's decision to invest in UPFSMs is clearly making a positive difference, with London's primary school children eating an average of 3.6 school meals per week (with 95% of responses falling within the 3.4-3.7 range). For comparison, the figure for the South East region is 2.8 (which may be accounted for in part by higher household incomes).

Wales sits above the national average, Scotland just below. At an average of 2.6, the situation in Northern Ireland is particularly notable.

Our research indicates that household income is a highly pertinent factor. Children in families where HHI is between £30,000 and £60,000 eat notably fewer school meals than other income groups; further evidence, perhaps, of the 'squeezed middle'.

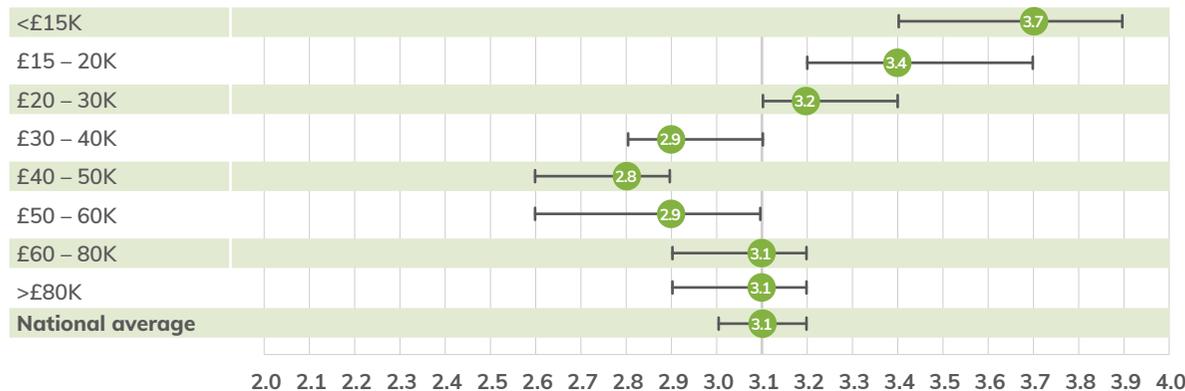
We are advocating that FSMs should be available to all; but if that is economically impossible, this finding underlines the importance of significantly increasing the eligibility threshold.

Finally, there appears to be some linkage between consumption and parental age. Children with older parents aged 45+ eat less school meals (2.8/week) than those with younger ones aged 18-34 (3.3/week). This could be a function of HHI – or, as we'll come on to explore, it might have something to do with how these families decide on whether the child will or will not eat school meals.

### REGION: Average number of school meals eaten per week by region



### HOUSEHOLD INCOME: Average number of school meals eaten per week by HHI

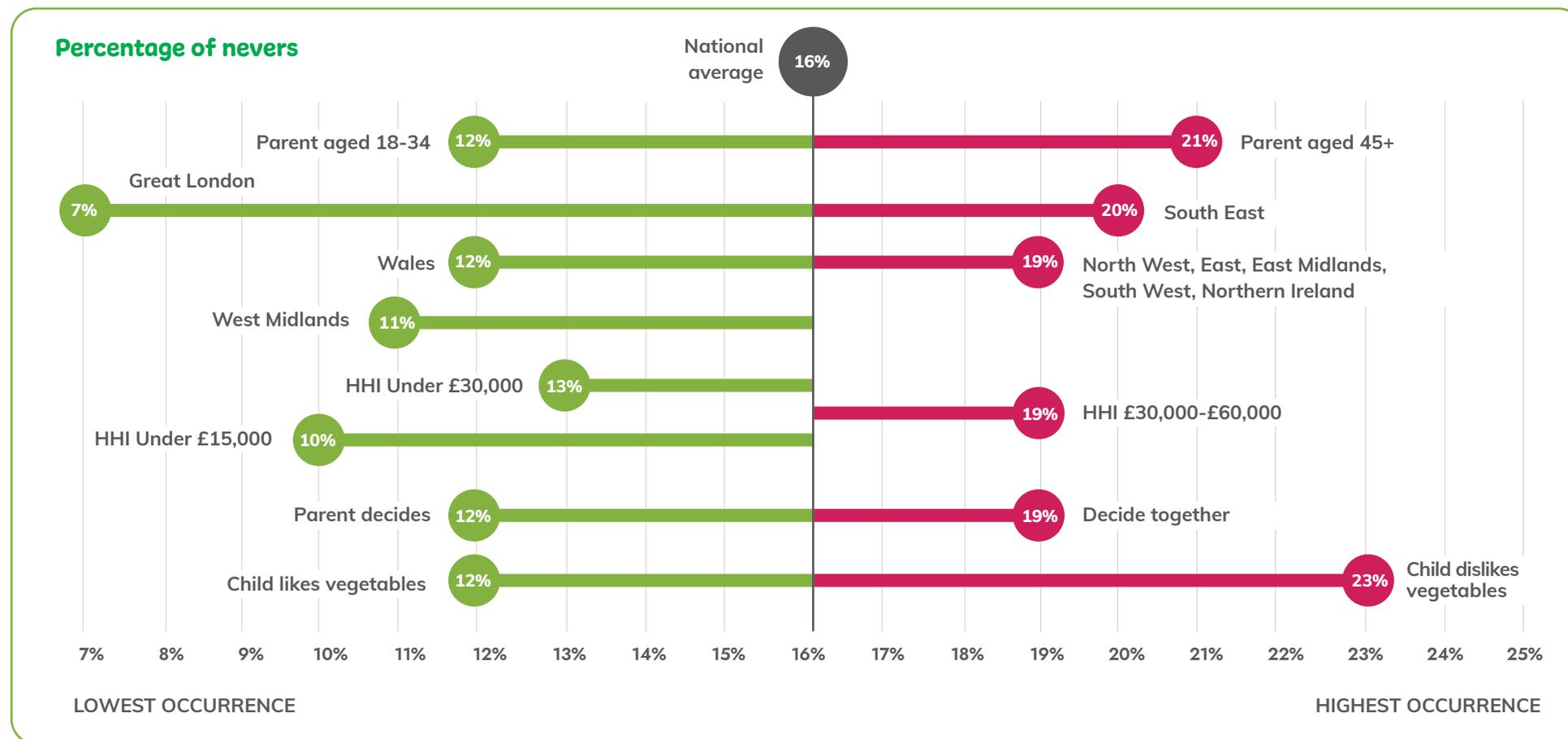


Confidence intervals / range of response shown for 95% of responses.

# FREQUENCY: Understanding “Never”

## What do we know about the 16% who never eat school meals?

As well as examining average frequency, it’s instructive to look at the extreme: the significant number of primary school children who never eat school meals. Where are the highest and lowest concentrations of ‘Nevers’?



# DECISIONS: Who Decides?

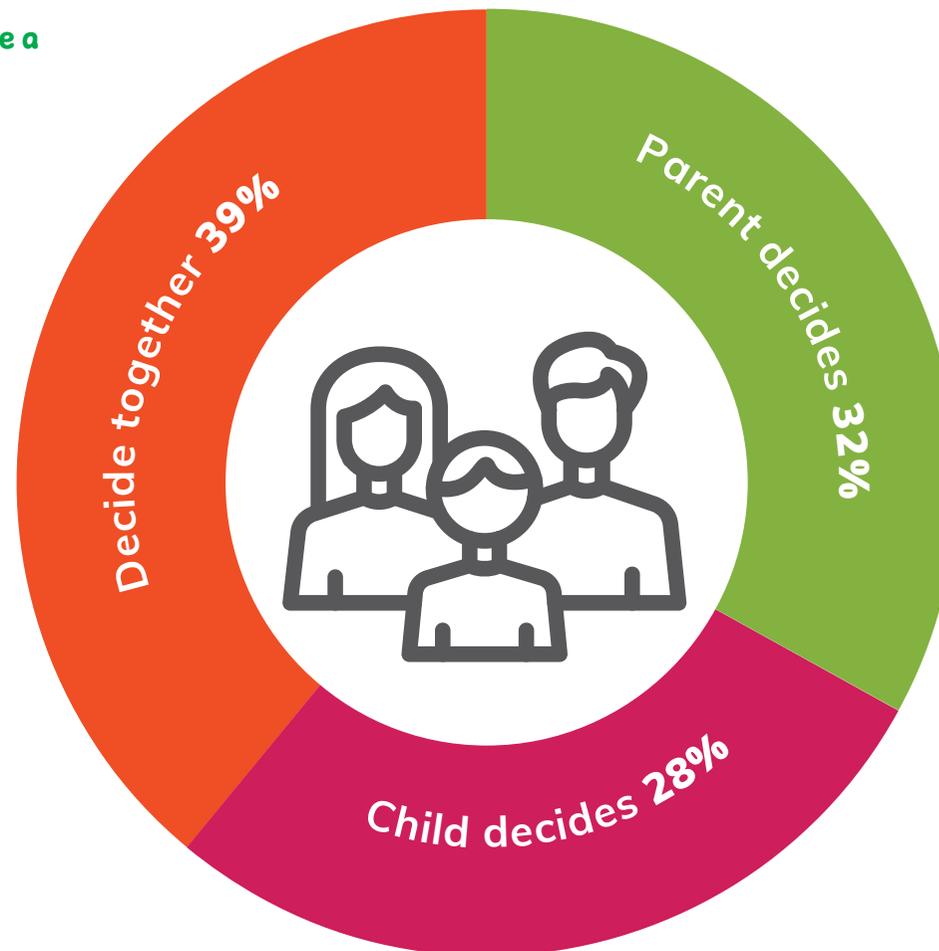
## How are school meal decisions made?

Self-evidently, there are three alternatives: either the parent or carer decides, the child decides, or the decision is reached jointly.

On a national basis, our survey found that 39% of decisions are made jointly. Of the remainder, there is a fairly even split between the parent / carer being the sole decision-maker (32%) and the child deciding (28%).



Who decides whether to have a school meal?



# DECISIONS: Profile Analysis

## How are school meal decisions made?

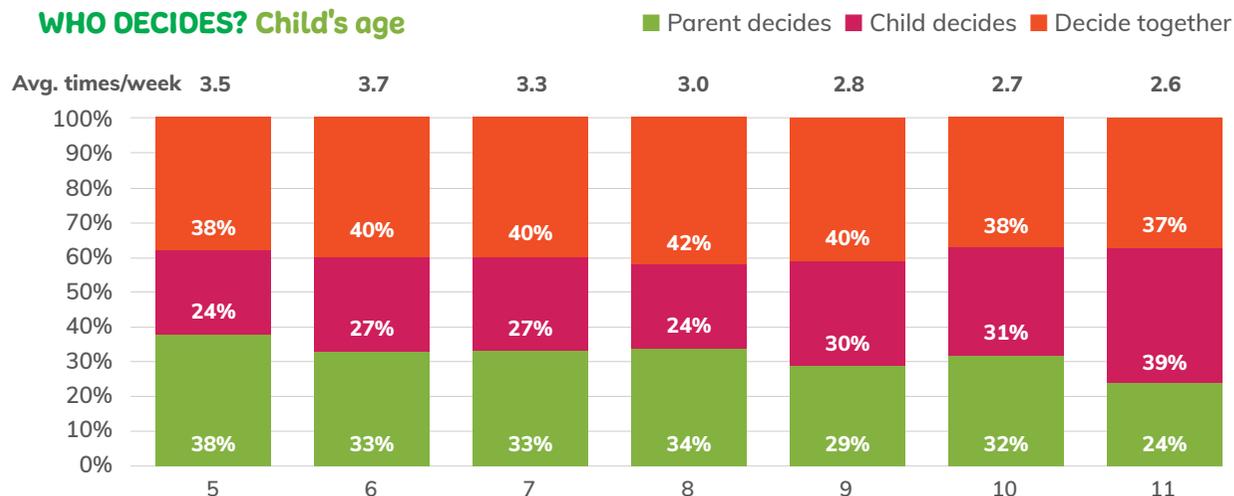
It's not surprising (but may be significant) that decisions gravitate away from the parent or carer as their child gets older. Once they're aged 11, nearly two in five school meal decisions are made by the child alone.

Parents aged 45+ appear to favour more inclusive decision-making, with 44% of decisions being made jointly. Remember, this is the segment where the average frequency of school meal consumption is lower and the percentage of 'Nevers' is higher.

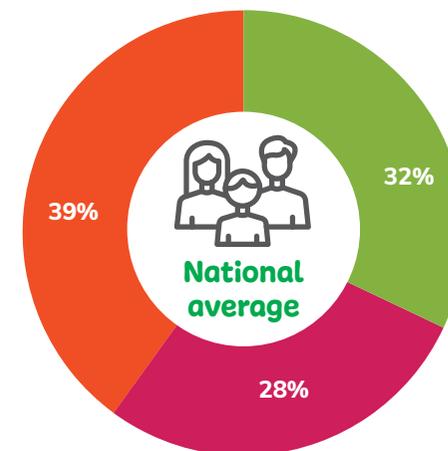
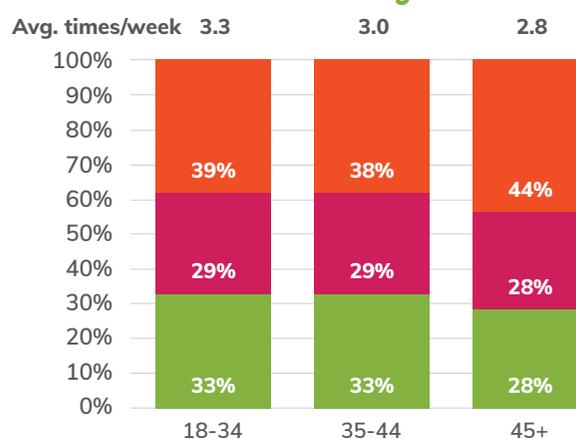
Children seem to hold sway in Scotland, being the sole decision-maker in 40% of households. The opposite is true in Greater London, where 41% of decisions are made by the parent alone.

HHI does not appear to play a major role in how decisions are made – until it exceeds £80,000, at which point parents are more likely to make the decision. (Our research does not separate out privately educated children. It is possible that this finding reflects the greater likelihood of children in this HHI bracket attending a private school.)

**WHO DECIDES? Child's age**

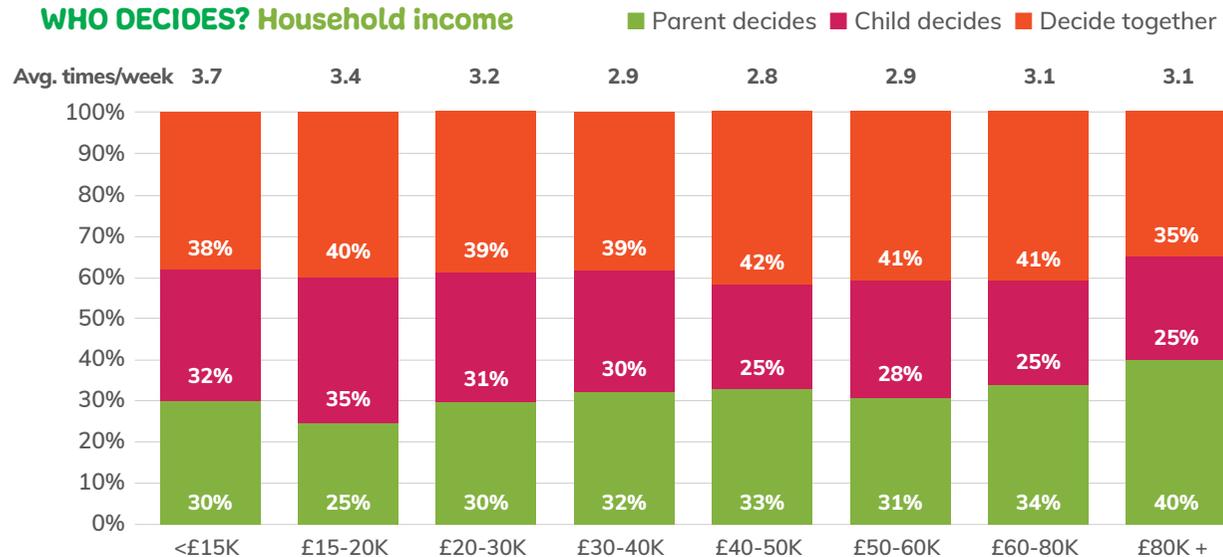


**WHO DECIDES? Parent's age**

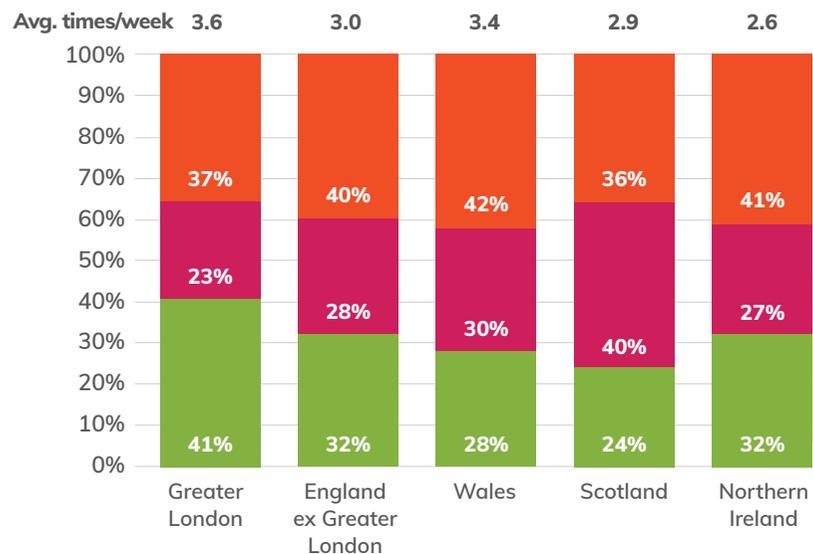


## Primary school meals: Who decides?

### WHO DECIDES? Household income



### WHO DECIDES? Region



It's important to note that the decision-making process does not appear to be influenced by whether a child is entitled to FSMs or not. The profile of these two groups is virtually identical. In other words: even if free meals were to be universally available, we can expect the child to have a say in over 60% of the decisions.

**61%**  
**CHILDREN**  
have a say in  
meal decisions



# DECISIONS: Impact on Outcomes

## How the decision-making process impacts outcomes.

How decisions are made correlates strongly with school meal consumption.

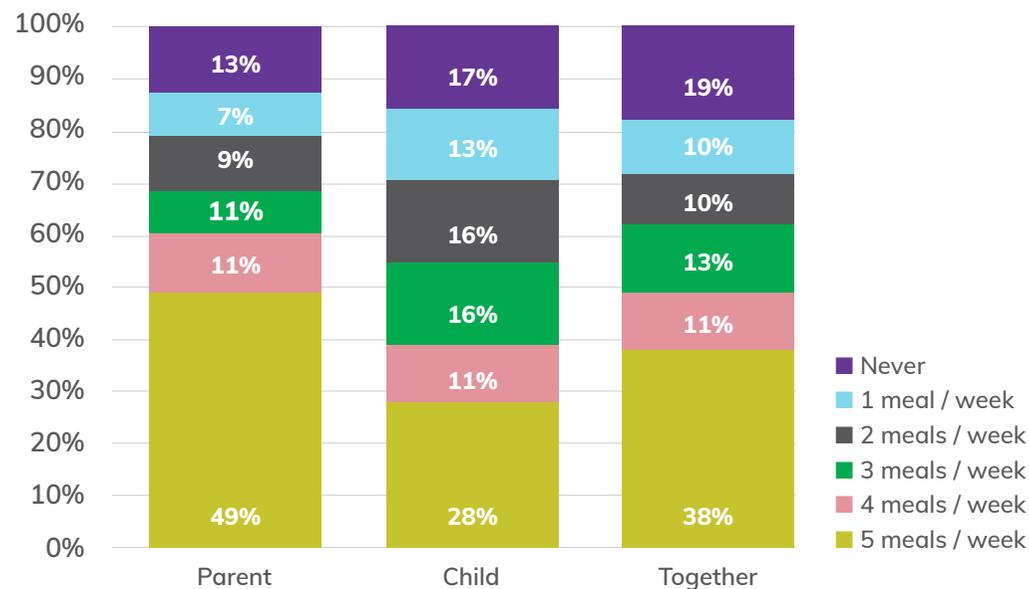
It would be premature to suggest direct cause and effect, but children do appear significantly more likely to eat school meals – and eat them more often – when the parent or carer says s/he is the sole decision-maker.

In an earlier [Veg Power report](#), we discussed how a combination of engaged parenting and role modelling seems to have a strongly positive impact on children’s attitudes to food in general and vegetables in particular. To illustrate the point: 64% of parents who claim to eat 2-3 handfuls of vegetables per day also claim that their child eats 2-3 handfuls per day; but only 19% of parents who do not eat 2-3 handfuls of

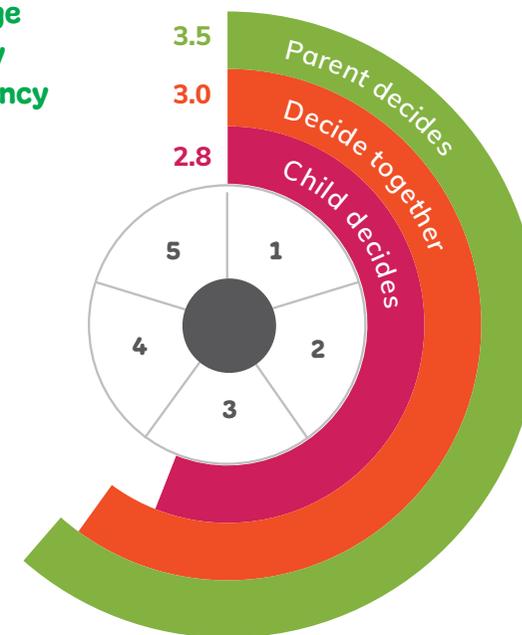
vegetables per day claim that their child eats that amount.

It may be that this pulls through into a child’s propensity to eat school meals. In any event, encouraging more parents and carers to take an active role in the decision-making process should be an important element in future communications efforts.

The relationship between who decides and uptake



Average weekly frequency



## Vegetables

There appears to be a link between a child's consumption of vegetables and their consumption of school meals.

A key measure we study is whether parents believe their child eats 2-3 handfuls of vegetables per day. It is one of our key indicators of consumption. We find questions about volume, variety, and willingness to try new vegetables asked of both parent and child map to this data point. Overall, 50% of UK parents now agree with the statement; a number that's been increasing by 2-3% per annum over the last few years. 68% of parents whose child has participated in the *Eat Them to Defeat Them* programme more than once agree, compared to 47% if the child has never taken part.

How does this key indicator correlate with school meal consumption? Among parents of children who never eat school meals, just 36% believe their child eats 2 – 3 handfuls of vegetables per day – way below the national average. Agreement then ticks up with each additional school meal eaten, topping out at 56% among children who always eat school meals. Of course, the logic here could be working either way. Do children eat more school meals because they're happy to eat vegetables? Or do they eat more vegetables because they're having school meals? Whichever it is, it's a positive outcome.



# BARRIERS: Children

## Identifying the barriers to uptake.

What factors dissuade primary school children from having school meals more often?

Any parent will know how hard it can be to get a child to eat something they're not keen on. Making school meals free won't resolve this issue.

When we asked children who rarely or never have school meals why they avoided school meals, 54% defaulted to saying they preferred a packed lunch. Of the 46% who don't "prefer a packed lunch" around a third are having a packed lunch because parents or carer prefer it. Below this default response, however, three clear dynamics emerged:

## Resistance to experimentation

A significant percentage of these children described themselves as 'fussy eaters' who 'don't like trying foods I haven't eaten before', especially if 'they're different to what I have at home'. These objections were particularly prevalent amongst children aged 5 – 7.

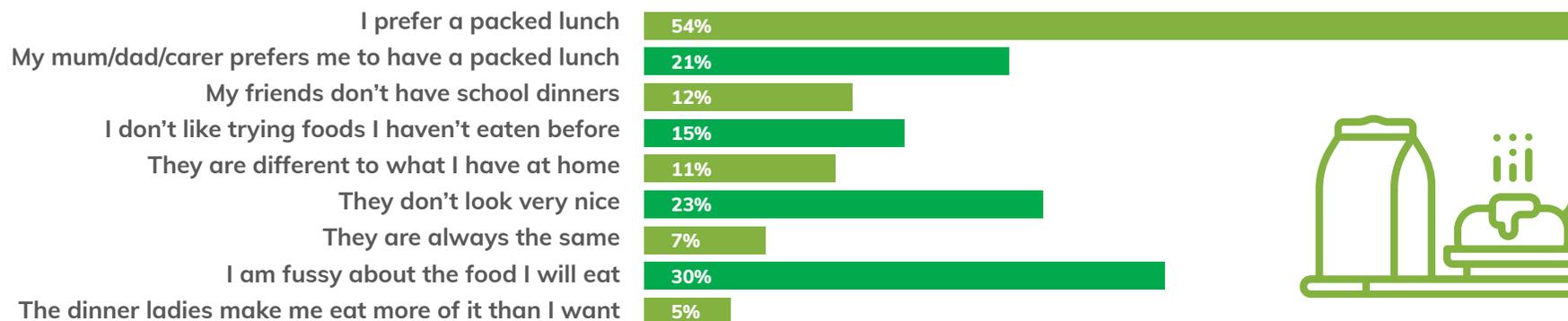
## The intrinsics of school meals

How meals are presented, a perceived lack of variety and (at a lower level) being 'made to eat more than I want' formed the second cluster of barriers. Presentation was cited as a particular issue by children aged 10 – 11 (and may be a way of rationalising 'fussiness' as they get older).

## Socialising / Mirroring friends

Some avoided school meals for the simple reason that their friends didn't have them. This barrier appears more strongly from age 8 onwards, as children exert greater autonomy and become increasingly sensitive to the social norms of their friendship group.

### What stops children who rarely or never have school meals having a school lunch more than they do?



# BARRIERS: The “Nevers”

## What are the main barriers for children who are ‘Nevers’?

It’s useful to compare ‘Regulars’ (which we define as those who eat school meals four times a week, and therefore sit well above the 3.1 average for all primary school children) with ‘Nevers’. The barriers for the latter group are obviously likely to be higher and stronger.

Only a very small minority of ‘Regulars’ say their parent(s) or carer prefers them to have a packed lunch, compared to nearly a quarter of ‘Nevers’.

56% of ‘Nevers’ express a personal preference for packed lunches. Echoing the findings from the total sample, the main reasons for this appear to be:

**Resistance to experimentation**, especially in terms of ‘fussiness’ and ‘I don’t like trying foods I haven’t eaten before’.

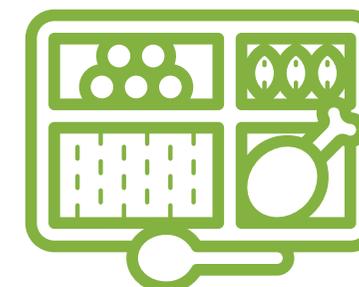
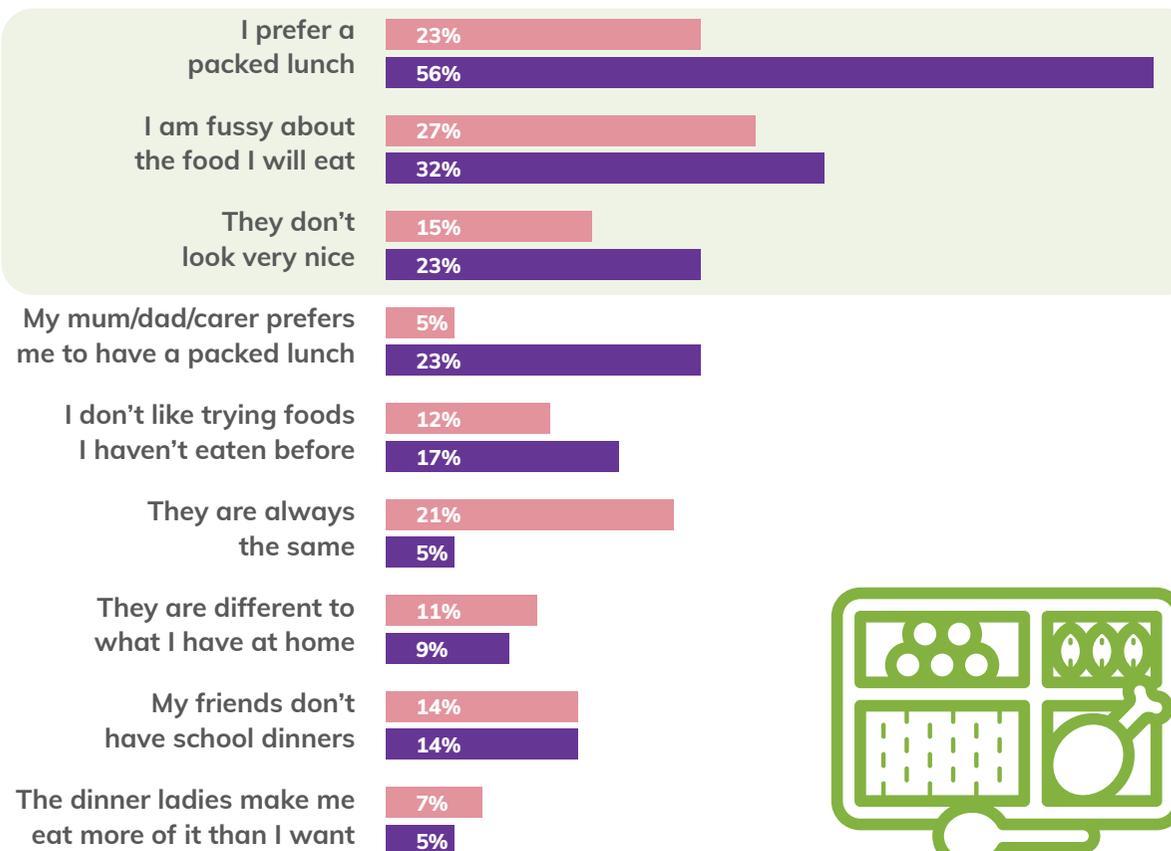
**The intrinsics of school meals**, especially in terms of how they look.

Socialising / mirroring friends is equally likely to be cited as a barrier by both segments.

There is one other finding here which is worth highlighting. Based on their experience, 21% of ‘Regulars’ nominate the fact that ‘they’re always the same’ as a reason for not eating more school meals.

Child’s barriers to having school meals

■ 4 time/week ■ Never



## BARRIERS: Parents

### What do parents see as the primary barriers?

The responses from parents were broadly similar. However, perceived expense was the third most frequently mentioned barrier.

19% of our total sample felt that 'school meals are expensive', a figure that rises to 23% amongst those who have to pay and 29% when the parent is the sole decision-maker.

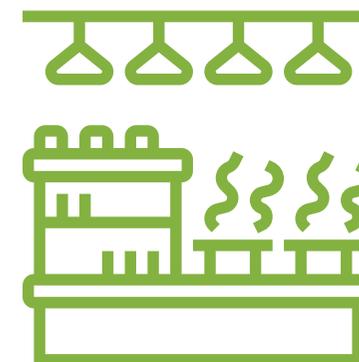
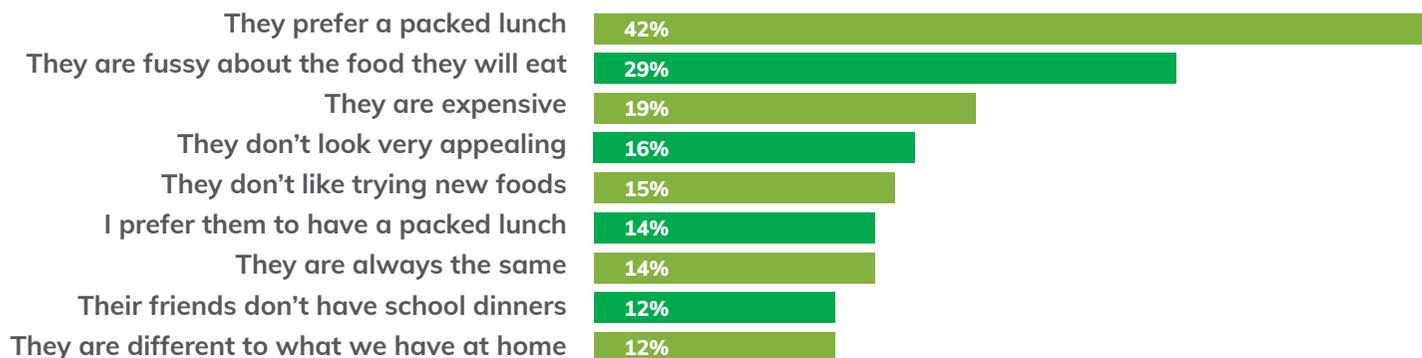
At 26%, cost was most likely to be an issue for households with an annual income of £20 – £30,000.

This is an area where the impact of policy is clearly evident. Expense was mentioned by just 6% of parents in Scotland, 8% in Wales and 13% in Greater London. But in the South East, it was referenced by 28% of parents – possibly reflecting higher charges in this corner of the country.



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### What stops your child having school dinners more often than they do?



# BARRIERS: Cost

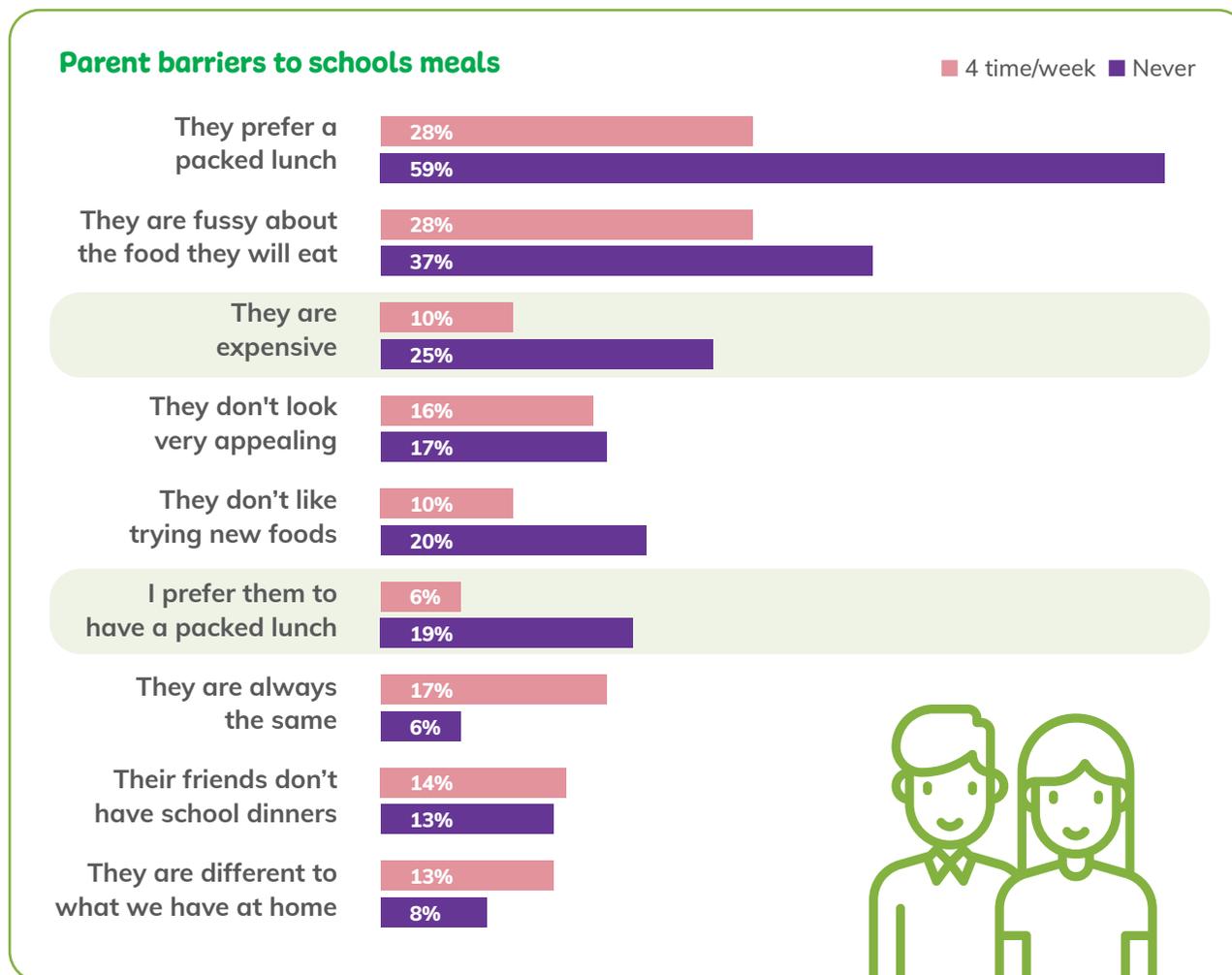
## What role does expense play for the parents of 'Nevers'?

Cost isn't the sole barrier for these parents & carers. They are more likely to cite their child's fussiness than perceived expense.

That said, cost is a major blocker. 25% of the parents of 'Nevers' think school meals are expensive, compared to 10% of the parents of 'Regulars'.

We can see this even more clearly when we look at 'Nevers' where the parent is the sole decision-maker. Exactly half of this segment mentions cost as a barrier to their child having more school meals.

Like everything else, the price of school meals has risen sharply over the past few years<sup>17</sup>. Short of providing FSMs, this will inevitably make it more difficult to persuade the parents & carers of 'Nevers' to become 'Occasionals' or 'Regulars'. Indeed, it could drive more parents & carers to opt out of school meals altogether.



# Correlation with Veg

## Veg attitudes and behaviours are clear markers.

Our research highlighted a range of barriers to eating school meals that extend well beyond cost.

It also found that what happens in the home appears to have a significant bearing on what happens at school.

Children with a negative attitude towards veg and / or a propensity to avoid veg eat less school meals on average. They are also much more likely to be 'Nevers'.

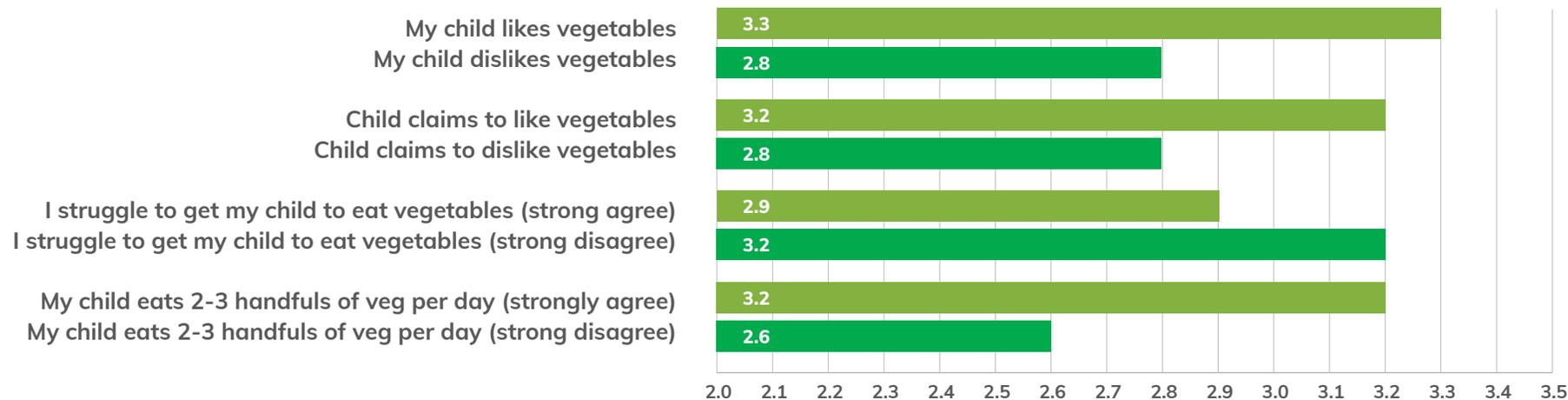
A key pillar of Veg Power's strategy has always been to 'join the dots' between home and school. To positively affect how children think and behave with regards to veg, influence needs to be exerted in both settings in parallel.

This finding shows that we – and all other interested parties – should double-down on our efforts.

### What happens at school may affect how children behave at home.

Nesta has piloted a series of interventions aimed at increasing the uptake of FSMs. In the accompanying survey, it found that 39% of parents reported that their children were less picky about food at home during the intervention period.

### Average school meals per week



# Overcoming Barriers

## Making school meals free will not be sufficient in isolation.

When we asked parents what would encourage them and their child to have school meals more often, 'free for everyone' was the most popular answer.

However, just 35% chose this option. Support amongst parents who currently pay for school meals was only marginally higher at 38%. At 41%, parents with a HHI of £40,000 - £50,000 were the strongest advocates of 'free for everyone'.

The next band of suggested strategies focused on the intrinsic qualities of school meals. There was demand for greater variety, improved presentation and better-quality ingredients. We appreciate that perceived shortcomings in these areas may be unfair to the catering community, especially given the cost and capacity challenges they face – but we also need to recognise that such perceptions are widespread amongst parents & carers.

A substantial minority of parents & carers also felt that actions should be taken to make school meal occasions more interactive and social. They proposed allowing pupils to sit with friends who are having a packed lunch; making mealtimes an 'event'; and giving children more of a voice in designing the meals.

### What, if anything, would encourage you and your child to have school dinners more often?

■ All parents

#### FINANCIAL

Free for everyone

35%

#### FOOD

Special dietary requirements

8%

Better portion sizes

17%

Closer to what they have at home

19%

Healthier

20%

Better quality ingredients

24%

Look more appetising

27%

More variety

31%

#### ENGAGEMENT

Made more of a (fun) occasion where the school comes together

12%

Caterers consult children on what they'd like

18%

Able to sit with friends who have a packed lunch

19%

0% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35% 40% 45%

## OVERCOMING BARRIERS:

# Nevers

### But making meals free will motivate a significant percentage of 'Nevers'.

Our research shows that 16% of primary school children never eat school meals. It is the parents of these children whose behaviours are most likely to change if meals are made free. 43% say such an initiative would persuade them and their child to have at least one school meal per week.

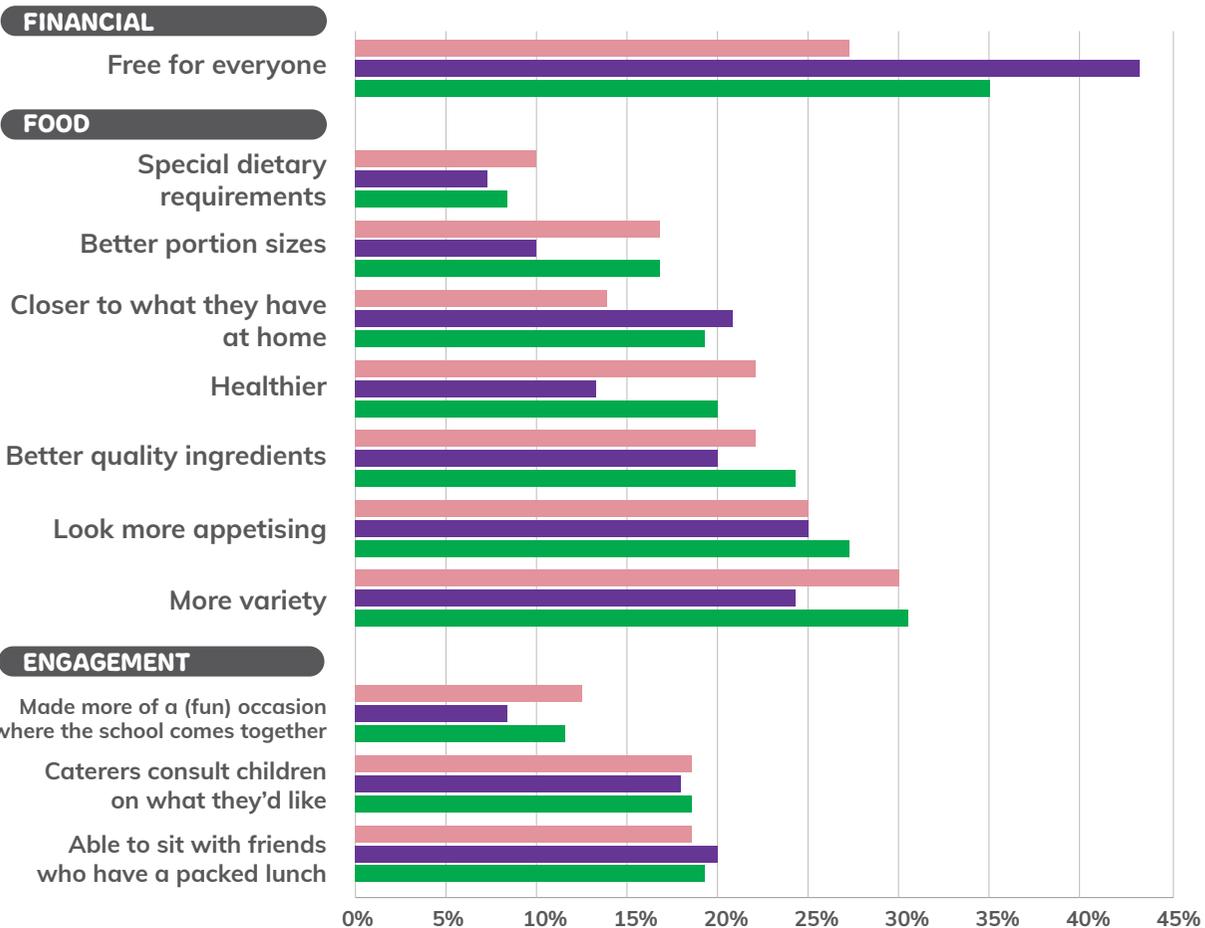
The pattern is repeated with 'Irregulars'. 45% of parents whose child currently eats an average of one school meal per week would eat more if meals were free. (For comparison, just over a quarter of parents whose child eats 3 or 4 school meals per week would be encouraged to eat more.)

It may be, therefore, that a primary benefit of providing UPFSMs will be to get children (and their parents) to "start the habit". But more will be required if frequency is to be driven towards four or five meals a week.

Just like 'Regulars', the parents of 'Nevers' are looking for greater assurance on the intrinsic of variety, presentation and quality of ingredients. Making meals healthier seems less of a concern for 'Nevers', although it certainly wouldn't harm the argument.

### What, if anything, would encourage you and your child to have school dinners more often?

■ 4 time/week ■ Never ■ All parents



## OVERCOMING BARRIERS:

# More than Cost

### What do parents want once the barrier of cost is removed?

As we've seen, cost is just one of the reasons why children aren't eating school meals more often.

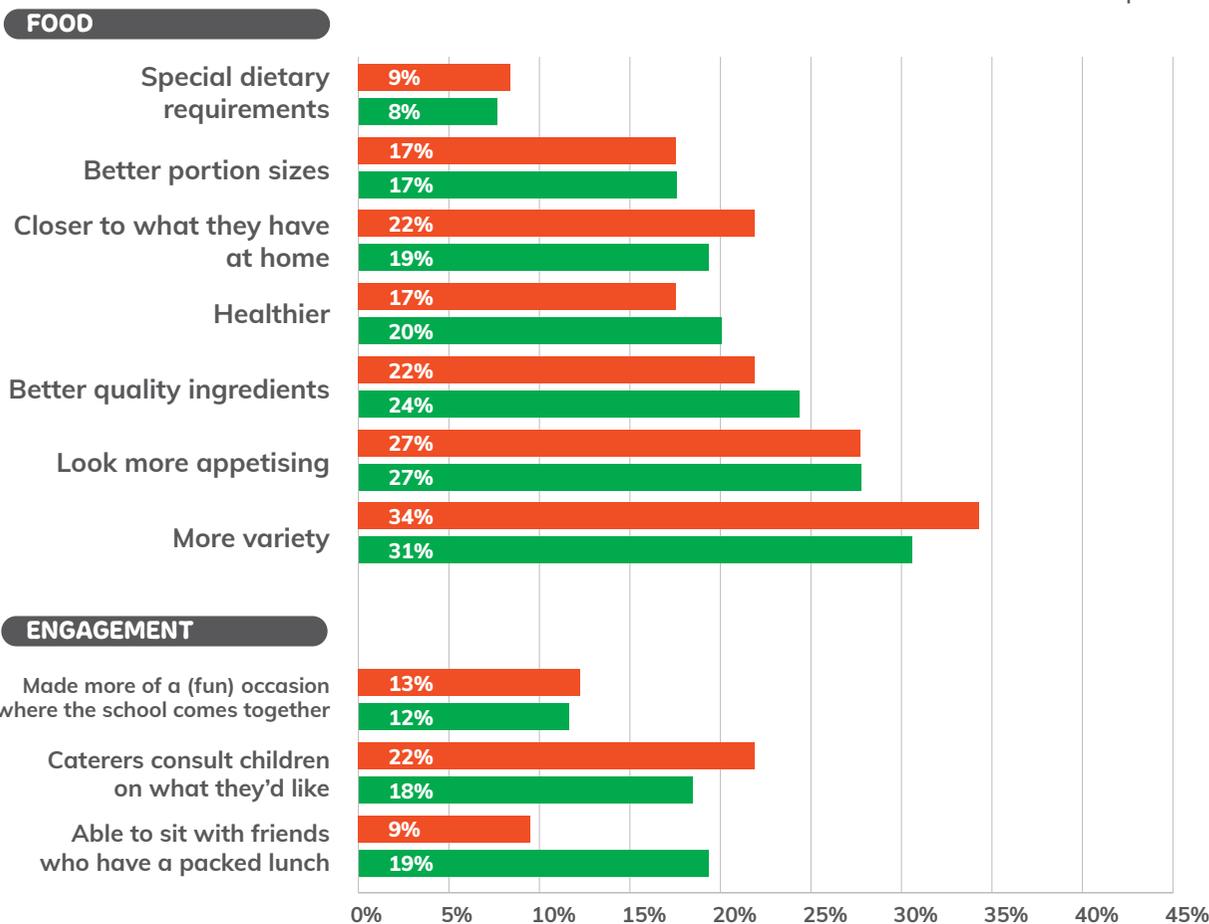
To get the clearest view on these other factors, it's worth zeroing in on a specific segment of our sample: parents who are entitled to free meals and whose child eats a school meal between one and four times a week. In other words: they aren't totally opposed to school meals but take advantage of them less frequently than they could.

The answers from these 450 people provide a clear hierarchy of the barriers that exist beyond cost. Dominating the list is a desire for more variety and better presentation. But there are two other changes that would significantly impact parental behaviours: 'meals that are closer to what their child has at home' and 'caterers consulting the children on what they would like'.

Of course, that can't mean pizza and chips for lunch every day; it's critical that nutritional standards are maintained. But it does flag opportunities to normalise school meals by making menu design more consultative, finding ways to import 'good' home practices into school kitchens and seeking a closer match with children's cultural and dietary preferences. This is a topic we intend to explore in greater detail in future research.

### What, if anything, would encourage you and your child to have school dinners more often?

■ 1-4 times/week + entitled to FSMs  
■ All parent



## Conclusions & recommendations

By **Dan Parker**, Chief Executive, Veg Power CIC

Hopefully our research has shed a little light and offered clues as to how we might improve things, here's our conclusions and recommendations.



# Research conclusions

## WHO DECIDES?

It's a mix of who decides on school meals in the family home, but where the parent alone decides uptake is significantly higher.

## RARELY OR NEVER

26% of our respondents only have school meals once per week or never. That drops to 10%-20% in areas and age groups where school meals are universally free.

## SQUEEZE MIDDLE

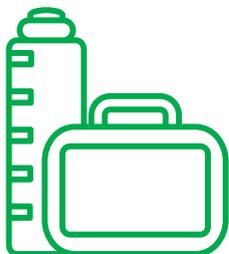
Take-up is lower amongst those in households with income between £30,000 and £60,000, the squeezed middle, who struggle despite their incomes.<sup>18</sup> Cost is an increasingly important issue as they navigate cost-of-living insecurity.

## IMPACT OF FREE

44% of parents whose child never eats a school meal, or eats just one a week, say they'd change their behaviour if meals were free. Driving this change is a key reason why UPFSMs must remain high on the political agenda.

## MORE THAN FREE

But what of the other 56%? Our research shows that making school meals free won't convince the majority of 'nevers' or 'once a weekers' to give up their packed lunches. Persuading this group will require different strategies and tactics.



## PACKED LUNCHES UNPACKED

Only 1.6% of packed lunches meet the same nutritional standards set for school food with children eating packed lunches consuming more total energy, sugar and

saturated fat and less fibre than those eating school meals. Less than a fifth (17%) of packed lunches contain any vegetables or salad, while more than half

(52%) contain too many sweet snacks<sup>19</sup>. No wonder that 54% of children who never or only rarely have school meals say they prefer a packed lunch.



## OUR VIEW

All in all, we might conclude that making primary school meals free addresses about half the issue. And that would be a significant win. It would improve the lives and educational attainment of hundreds of thousands of children, many of whom are living with food insecurity.

But we can't ignore the other half of the issue. There are some 10-15% of all primary-aged children – possibly as many as one million kids – where the challenge runs deeper than cost alone. Common sense and our data indicate that these are the children with the lowest consumption of vegetables and the poorest overall diet...exactly the group that Veg Power was set up to support.

# VEGPOWER

# Recommendations

## ACCESS

We support the calls for school meals to be free and universal from nursery through to secondary. As we finalise this report we are delighted to hear Westminster City Council announce the extension of FSM to nursery and into secondary. Public finances might limit options today but increasing eligibility to lower

and lower-middle earners in primary schools is essential.

This needs to be enabled by friction-free enrolment systems and school leadership trained and supported to be clear and consistent on their messaging that school meals are the best choice.

## STANDARDS

The standards need to be harmonised across the UK, updated in line with the latest dietary guidelines and better monitored for uptake, quality and waste. We'd like to include removal of the requirement to offer meat and a dessert at every meal, a requirement for meals to include at least two portions and types of vegetable and include support for water only schools.

## FUNDING

Funding for FSMs is inconsistent across the UK and too low in Northern Ireland and England. Budgets have simply not kept up with inflation. Many caterers tell us that the only way they have survived this pressure is to reduce quality and choice to the minimum standards when they yearn to be brilliant. Fillet fish fingers become mince, vegetable choices are limited, and the salad bars go. Many also report that they have cut back on

the team and funding on the value-added efforts that make so much difference. 80% of caterers want to improve their school meal provision.<sup>21</sup> Let's help them.

Funding for FSMs needs to increase to £3.00 as a minimum, index linked and ring-fenced. Let's create a race to the top rather than the grind to the bottom we are seeing in way too many schools today.



## OUR VIEW

There are three critical issues which dominate the school meals agenda. There are many fine organisations championing these three issues and they have our full support.

At Veg Power we look at the human dynamics rather than policy dynamics that drive systems. What do people think? How do they feel? What do they care about? We believe there is a fourth critical issue in school meals that warrants equal importance....engagement.

**VEGPOWER**

## RECOMMENDATIONS: Engagement

Eat Them to Defeat Them is a very successful campaign. Millions of children are eating more veg and overwhelmingly asking to do it again. Why? Because we engage kids and make food fun, they respond by eating the thing that many like least...veg.

### Eat Them to Defeat Them 2019-2024:

**5000+** schools have taken part.

**1.7m** children enjoyed activities & reward charts.

**77%** of parents of children who took part in schools said those children ate more vegetables.

**87%** of children want the programme to return to their school.

**55%** of parents report a lasting increase in veg consumption from repeat participation.

The same can be said of projects such as Healthy Eating Week, National School Meals Week, Food Dudes, The Lunch Bunch, TastEd and the many theme days and value adds delivered by caterers, schools and community groups. They all have one thing in common... if you make an effort to engage children, they respond.



## Primary school meals: Who decides?



Herein lies the key to the final 10-15% who will not switch to a school meal even if free, because they prefer their sugary, veg-free and unhealthy packed lunch. We simply won't win them over with more choice, healthier ingredients, large portions or auto-enrolment and pupil consultation. It's worth noting that half of this group (but only half) will only eat school meals once per week - ask any caterer and they will tell you that is the day that they serve fish & chips or pizza. Serve those everyday and the children will come everyday, but we can't drop the nutritional standard to compete for their taste buds. The food alone will not win them over.

Engagement comes in many forms, theme events such as *Eat Them to Defeat Them*, saint days, UEFA football themes, world book day and many more. Such events bring a short spark of excitement that draws children in. Real change comes from deeper everyday engagement such

as a great lunchtime culture, taster session, menu design, eating with the teachers, inviting in parents, more variety (a salad bar today, a pasta bar tomorrow).

**Real change comes from deeper everyday engagement**

Let's increase access to school food, improve it and fund it but let's also direct some of our efforts to making meals more engaging. Let's train and inspire school leaders to see meals as the beating heart that energises their children, where friendships grow, lifelong good habits form and children, all children, including the most resistant, come to play, learn and grow.

### Conclusions and recommendations by Dan Parker, Chief Executive, Veg Power

These conclusions and recommendations are those of Veg Power. They are not intended to represent the views of the many who have kindly contributed to this report or kindly support our work.



Veg Power works with over 5,000 primary and special schools in the UK and with dozens of caterers representing the lion share of the sector.

We have enjoyed lunch in dozens of schools and a fair few I'd happily pay for in a pub, others, well, not so much. We've seen schools where children socialise and eat well and others where the children gobble down the minimum to satisfy their hunger before shovelling the vegetables into the waste as they dash out to play.

What determines that difference? Above all, it is the school leadership team. Too often we see schools who view lunch as an outsourced process, caterers whose responsibility only goes as far as the food served and a poorly paid and supported dining room assistants who just want to get the kids processed and out to play with the least amount of friction. The losers in this equation are the children. If we truly want to improve the food in children's bellies then we need to better engage school leadership teams on the massive contribution a good lunch can make to their school.

## CASE STUDY: Nourish Catering in London

At Nourish, providing compelling added value is a key ingredient to our success. We do not underestimate the power of inspiring awe and wonder in children. We deliver important messages via our creative and engaging dining environments, nurturing learning and encouraging a love of nutritious food. We have seen first-hand the positive effect this has on meal uptake. We believe the most successful outcomes occur when we work in partnership with schools, ensuring good quality wholesome food remains at the heart of everything we do.

**We have seen first-hand the positive effects this has on meal uptake**

We have picked just a few examples below to demonstrate the importance of value that goes beyond the provision of high-quality meals.

### Mr Nourish and Friends

Our company mascot Mr Nourish is a firm favourite with our schools. He brings the magic to our dining halls, delighting our young guests by guiding children through menus, participating in healthy eating assemblies, and hosting special days and competitions.

As a familiar face in our schools, Mr Nourish's visits are eagerly anticipated. His primary school visits help foster an engaging lunchtime



experience, whilst affirming important educational messages. Although it is difficult to quantify his overall impact on meal numbers, the great demand amongst our clients is a testament to his popularity. He has a dedicated diary at HQ to keep track of his busy schedule and in line with demand, his family has grown; with newcomers, Chef

Nourish and Gardener Nourish having joined the team, our mascot family can now reach even more young minds.

The Nourish mascot family is also at the heart of several other value-added activities. Another popular and successful initiative is Chef Nourish's Cookery Club where children learn to prepare and enjoy delicious healthy recipes in a fun kitchen atmosphere. Children experiment with recipes from an attractive Nourish cookbook, learning about units of measurement, seasonal crops and how seasonality affects food prices. Each participant receives a folder detailing the recipes they have cooked and a certificate of achievement.

Mr Nourish is also the subject of his own storybooks, with two currently in print and more to come. The books feature tales of Mr Nourish helping children to discover and prepare exciting fruits and vegetables and can be given out as prizes at school visits.



### Engaging with Families

We love to provide our school's wider community, parents and carers with the opportunity to speak directly with us. Nourish regularly hosts taster sessions for parents, this allows us to showcase our menu and talk to parent/carers on topics such as allergens, menus, and portion

## Primary school meals: Who decides?

size, and to answer any questions they may have, assuring them that they can engage at any time.

We recently hosted a celebratory Grandparents' Afternoon Tea at Southwold Primary. Pupils spent quality time with their grandparents and families, sharing stories over freshly made cakes and sandwiches, all beautifully presented by the catering team. The event was a resounding success having been enjoyed by all.

At Woodcote Primary School, our catering team recently supported an Eid Community Event, providing a delicious, decadent celebratory meal for pupils and their families. The evening was hugely popular and our staff were honoured to take part.

### Eat Them to Defeat Them!

Nourish is particularly passionate about Veg Power's, *Eat Them to Defeat Them* initiative which lasts for six weeks, allowing on-site teams plenty of time to inspire the children to get more veg into their diet. The creative displays and recipes generate excitement and encourage the children to try new veg-based recipes. During the campaign, children become very daring, often trying dishes they would shy away from, and newcomers are enticed to try Nourish lunches.

This year, the Nourish team at Pinner Park Primary wowed the school with creative displays of carved vegetables, illustrated posters and character-led vegetable displays, proudly earning a Silver Award for their talents. Their creativity tapped into the pupils' imaginations, creating a special and fun atmosphere across the school, with the children eagerly anticipating each Veg



Power Thursday when the main display would be revealed!

### LACA D-Day Event

On June 6th Nourish, partnered with LACA, the school food people, to honour the 80th anniversary of the historic D-Day landings with an event that paid tribute to the bravery and sacrifice of those who served during World War Two. The day began at Ashford Oaks Community Primary School in Kent where the children took part in a special assembly and learned of the

struggles of people during the war as they experienced food rationing.

After an appearance by Mr Nourish, the children tucked into a themed meal of Spitfire battered fish and chips, with some saying it was the best day ever!

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**Annette Ryan Murphy, Owner, Nourish Contract Catering Limited**

*Nourish is a privately owned, family-run contract catering company, providing high-quality meal services to schools across London and the South East.*

## Primary school meals: Who decides?

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## VEGPOWER

Veg Power is a not-for-profit Community Interest Company on a mission to turn around vegetable consumption in the UK. Over 80% of our children are not eating enough vegetables, with a third eating less than one portion a day. Veg Power runs creative initiatives to engage,

inspire and motivate people to eat more veg and create life-long good food habits.

To change children's perceptions of veg, Veg Power runs the award-winning Eat Them to Defeat Them campaign. Since the campaign debuted in January 2019 it has been supported by over £20m of advertising and a programme in more than 5,000 primary schools for 1.7m different children. Over 50% of parents report

that repeated participation in Eat Them to Defeat Them creates a lasting improvement in the variety and volume of vegetables their child consumes. Veg Power also runs #SeasonalVeg social media influencer campaign to increase consumption of British vegetables and the Simply Veg campaign to provides parents & carers with simple advice and ideas to increase vegetable consumption while helping to reduce the impact on families' budgets and decrease the amount of food waste.

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