



## Call for more free school meals in Wales

Recent research from Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) shows that **more than half of children in Wales who live in poverty are not entitled to free school meals**. In a typical class of 25 children, seven will be living in poverty, and four of these will not be able to get a free school meal.

In addition, **children in Wales are worse off than children growing up in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland**, because Wales has a tighter means-test and less generous universal infant provision than other nations. In this briefing, we make the case for making free school meals available to more children across Wales.

### What do the numbers say?

There are around 469,000 school-age children in state-funded education in Wales. Nearly 129,000 of them are currently living in poverty: that's seven in a classroom of 25. CPAG's new calculations show that more than half (**over 70,000**) of these children living in poverty are not eligible for free school meals. This is mainly because their parents are in low-paid jobs and don't meet the Welsh government rules to get them (they earn more than the 'threshold' of £7,400 a year). These children also tend to be in households with couples rather than lone parents (as the threshold is not adjusted for couples).

In addition, **nearly 6,000** children in Wales cannot normally access the meals because their families are subject to an immigration condition, 'no recourse to public funds', which prevents them from accessing most forms of state support.

### What is the best solution?

Taking action to expand eligibility for free school meals would help struggling families to cope, improve outcomes in school and tackle in-work poverty.

CPAG calls for **universal free school meals**. We don't think food in schools should be means-tested – every school-age child should be able to get a nutritious cooked meal as part of the school day.

Here are some of the benefits of removing means-testing and providing free school meals for every child:

1. **It helps to tackle inequalities.** Many families living in poverty are not currently entitled to free school meals for their children, but are unable to afford to pay for meals themselves.
2. **It supports family budgets and home life.** Families with more than one child particularly benefit from this increase in additional income that can be spent on other living costs, ultimately reducing pressure on household finances.
3. **It boosts learning and attainment.** School meals have a positive impact on the learning experiences and attainment of all pupils, particularly less affluent pupils.
4. **It boosts uptake and reduces poverty-related stigma.**
5. **It helps to create bonds in the dinner hall through shared meal experiences.** Free school meals have a positive impact on wellbeing in school, especially children's social relationships.
6. **It supports children's health.** Having a balanced meal each day can have a positive impact on children's health and development. It also helps to increase concentration levels.

CPAG estimates that providing a daily lunchtime meal to every child in school would cost the Welsh Government an additional £130 million per year on top of the current free school meals provision.

## What needs to be done most urgently?

While we believe that **universal free school meals are the best option for all children**, we know it will take time to build capacity and systems to provide cooked meals to every pupil in Wales. As an interim step, we would also welcome a change in the eligibility criteria so no child in poverty misses out. Broadening eligibility would instantly provide greater security for low-income families, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic. As an immediate response, we call for the following urgent measures:

- 1. Extending free school meals to all families receiving universal credit (or equivalent benefits)**  
Many families on universal credit who currently do not qualify for free school meals fall well below the poverty line. If the Welsh Government implemented this measure, we estimate an additional 145,000 children would benefit from free school meals. This could provide a protective measure for families who may be facing financial insecurity and fluctuations in income during this uncertain period. It would cost an extra £60 million per year.
- 2. Permanently extending free school meals to families with no recourse to public funds**  
During the pandemic, the Welsh Government extended free school meals to low-income families with no recourse to public funds, stating that these families may be experiencing severe hardship. CPAG estimates that 5,900 school-age children in Wales are in families with no recourse to public funds. Many of these children will be living well below the UK's poverty line. A permanent extension of free school meals to children with no recourse to public funds would cost a maximum of £2.6 million per year if all 5,900 children are living in households below the income threshold.
- 3. Introducing universal free school meals for Foundation Phase learners across Wales**  
England and Scotland already provide universal free meals for all infant learners, which has demonstrated a number of proven benefits for children and families:
  - They support the development of children and their ability to learn
  - They help tackle inequalities and child poverty
  - They reduce stigma and increase uptake among the poorest families
  - They improve children's health, which also helps improve attainmentFailure to provide universal free meals for our youngest learners means significantly more children in poverty miss out on free school meals in Wales compared to the rest of the UK. If Wales offered universal free school meals in the Foundation Phase, an additional 80,000 school children (in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2) could be provided with a lunchtime meal each day. This policy would cost an additional £30 million each year.

## Conclusion

In light of the additional financial pressures caused by the pandemic, the Welsh Government should urgently take the measures outlined in this briefing to provide more free school meals to children in Wales. This would help struggling families and improve children's health and wellbeing. In the longer term, the Welsh Government must work towards universal provision of free school meals, which would provide the greatest benefit for all children, and reduce stigma and inequality. Free school meals won't end child poverty alone, but they will go some way towards supporting family incomes while also making school a more equitable experience for children and young people.

Beyond free school meals, CPAG is calling on the UK government to increase child benefit by £10 per child per week to ensure parents can cover the additional costs of raising their children, such as school uniform and clothing costs, childcare and food.

For further details of the calculations, please visit: <https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/wales-over-half-children-poverty-missing-out-free-school-meals>

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