



Fixing Lunch: The case for expanding free school meals

A [Covid Realities](#) and [Child Poverty Action Group](#) Rapid-Response Report, August 2021

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Key findings

- Despite a recent rise in the number of children eligible for free school meals (FSMs), one million children in poverty across the UK remain ineligible.
- Differences in the eligibility criteria for means-tested FSMs, and variations in the provision of universal FSMs for primary school pupils, mean that there are large differences between the different nations in the UK. Universal primary FSM in Scotland and more generous means-tested FSM eligibility criteria in Northern Ireland mean the share of children who miss out is much lower than in England and Wales.
- Covid Realities participants highlighted three key areas where there are problems:
 1. Restrictive eligibility criteria.
 2. Increased financial pressures during the holidays and patchy holiday provision.
 3. Barriers to FSM take-up, and the need for universal provision.
- Our key recommendations, developed with Covid Realities participants, are:
 1. Work towards the long-term goal of universal provision of FSM for all children across the UK, which would cost £1.8bn.
 2. In the short term, increase eligibility to every family on Universal Credit (or equivalent benefits), which would only cost £700m. Eligibility should also be extended to all families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF).
 3. Following the Scottish Government's lead, extend free school meals to all primary school children across the UK at a cost of £770m.¹
 4. Support family finances throughout the year by addressing the inadequacy of the social security system. As a first step, the planned £20 cut to universal credit must be abandoned.

¹ As different nations currently have different levels of universal FSM provision, what extending to all primary school pupils entails will be country specific. In England, the cost would be to cover pupils in years 3-6, as infant pupils already receive FSMs. In Wales and Northern Ireland, the cost covers all pupils in infant years (reception, year 1 and year 2), as well as years 3-6. In Scotland, the cost is £0 as the government has already committed to rolling out FSM provision to all primary pupils.

Introduction

Free school meal (FSM) provision has been thrust into the media spotlight during the pandemic. But how widespread is FSM coverage? How do parents feel about FSM provision? And what do they think could be done to improve it?

This report brings together findings from CPAG analysis and the Covid Realities research programme² to highlight problems with existing FSM provision. It also draws on research carried out as part of CPAG and Children North East's *UK Cost of the School Day* project.³ CPAG analysis shows that, despite a rise in the number of children claiming FSMs between March 2020 and March 2021, there are still one million school-aged children in poverty who miss out on any form of FSM provision because of restrictive eligibility criteria.

Parents and carers taking part in Covid Realities regularly flagged the importance of FSMs, where their children were eligible for them. However, other participants were not eligible for FSMs and identified the restrictive eligibility criteria as a key problem. Participants also highlighted the financial pressures families experience over the holidays when FSMs are not available. Here we set out recommendations for change that have been developed in partnership with Covid Realities participants. These recommendations are ambitious but achievable, and we call on political leaders across the four nations of the UK to act now. Increasing FSM eligibility won't end child poverty alone, but it will go some way towards supporting family incomes while also making school a more equal experience for pupils.

FSM eligibility across the UK

The most recent government statistics show a large rise in FSM eligibility in England and Wales.⁴ COVID-19 has led to higher unemployment, and therefore more children have become eligible.⁵ But there has also been increased take-up due to greater media attention and awareness of FSMs. Nevertheless, the question remains: how many children in poverty miss out?

This number can be calculated through statistical analysis of household income data, while accounting for other factors such as children covered through universal infant FSM schemes.⁶

² See Appendix 3 for more information about Covid Realities.

³ More information about the Cost of the School Day project is available at cpag.org.uk/cosd

⁴ *Schools, pupils and their characteristics*, Department for Education, July 2021; *Schools' census results: April 2021 (provisional)*, Welsh Government, June 2021.

Recent statistics for Scotland and Northern Ireland are not yet available. Estimates for the number of children in poverty who miss out in these countries are therefore partially based on trends observed in England and Wales. For more details see the Methodology section.

⁵ See Appendix 1 for more details on eligibility thresholds.

⁶ For more details see the Methodology section. The roll-out of universal FSMs to primary 4 and primary 5 pupils in Scotland has been included in these calculations.

Table 1: Number and share of children in poverty who are not eligible for free school meals

Nation/country	Number of children in poverty who are not eligible for FSMs	Share of school-aged children in poverty who are not eligible for FSMs
England	900,000	37%
Scotland	25,000	17%
Wales	55,000	42%
Northern Ireland	20,000	22%
UK	1,000,000	36%

Table 1 shows how the number of children in poverty who are not eligible for FSMs varies across different parts of the UK. In total, one million children in poverty miss out, representing 36% of all school-aged children in poverty. Unsurprisingly, the majority of children are in England, due to its much larger population. It is therefore more informative to look at how the share of school-aged children in poverty who are ineligible differs across the different parts of the UK. We can see that Scotland has the lowest share at 17%, followed by Northern Ireland at 22%. In England 37% of school-aged children in poverty are ineligible, and this is even higher in Wales 42%.

It is worth looking at which factors drive the variation across different parts of the UK. Broadly speaking, there are three factors that affect the number of children in poverty who miss out:

1. Eligibility criteria for means-tested FSMs
2. Provision of universal FSMs
3. Underlying child poverty rate

Scotland has a relatively low number of children in poverty who miss out, as despite having strict eligibility criteria for means-tested FSMs, it has the highest level of universal FSMs and a lower child poverty rate. Northern Ireland also fares relatively well as, despite not having any universal FSMs, it has the most generous eligibility criteria for means-tested FSMs and a relatively low child poverty rate. Wales has a relatively high number of children in poverty who miss out as they no universal FSMs, restrictive eligibility criteria for means-tested FSMs and a high child poverty rate.

FSMs: families' perspectives

We spoke in depth to parents in families living on a low income about FSMs, to get their views on current provision as well as what needs to change. These discussions focused on the importance of FSMs as well as the eligibility criteria of means-tested FSMs, out of term time provision, and the benefits of universal FSMs.

All parents whose children receive FSMs said how much they value that provision. Parents frequently refer to FSMs as making a “huge difference” to family life. This is supported by other evidence, for example, parents and pupils who have participated in the Cost of the School Day project.

So very much appreciated to have that back up. One income or low-income families quite often don't or can't have a back-up plan when times are tough. For me it's peace of mind. (Mum, Glasgow)⁷

Now that I know I'm definitely getting that money, I'm not worrying about needing lunch – I know I will get it." (Student, North Shields)⁸

The rest of this section will focus on Covid Realities participants' experiences of particular features of FSM provision.

Eligibility Criteria

Being in receipt of working tax credit was a particularly problematic barrier to receiving FSMs mentioned by multiple parents and carers. In England and Wales, those claiming working tax credit are not eligible for FSM support, regardless of income. Nova told us:

We as a family would be better off not getting working tax credit as that stops us being entitled to free school meals, yet we pay over triple the amount we receive in working tax credit on school meals ... really makes me wonder how many more people don't get free school meals due to a tiny amount of working tax credits!

Howie P is a single parent who is self-employed and living on a low income. She does not receive FSMs for her children:

We have no FSM support, this causes problems as we are a low-income family. I am a single parent and self-employed with a super precarious and changeable income, but receipt of working tax credit automatically means we don't qualify. It's been like this for years. In school, this means that my children are not flagged up as struggling as many schools use FSMs as a measure of family circumstances. It has caused problems for us when I have needed to let school know that we couldn't afford some things, like a trip, technology, transport etc. It's almost like they think that I am making it up. A lack of understanding of different income-related benefits and issues such as rising in-work poverty means that schools are not good at identifying where support is needed without the FSM label. If I changed over to UC we would then be entitled but the thought of going 5 weeks with no money and the possibility of lower financial support over all is so frightening no one will do that willingly.

⁷ *The Cost of Learning in Lockdown*, CPAG, June 2020

⁸ *The Cost of Missing Lunchtime*, CPAG, Children North East and the North East Child Poverty Commission, May 2021

Howie's entry flags the shortcomings with eligibility thresholds for FSMs, but also the extent to which FSM eligibility is then used to dictate access to additional forms of financial support (for example, not being expected to pay for school trips). Pupils in schools have also reported to CPAG that school meals can be too expensive for their families to afford.

I used to be school dinners, but now I have packed lunch... I think it was because you have to pay lots of money for school dinners... they're a bit expensive. (Pupil, aged 7)⁹

Financial support for families over the holidays

During the pandemic, extended FSM provision during the school holidays was a vital support for many families who would have otherwise struggled to meet their children's needs. However, the reliance on this type of support demonstrates the precarious nature of many families' budgets, and highlights the need for greater financial security so parents don't have to make impossible decisions throughout the year. Milly lives in England and her children receive FSMs:

We do get free school meals and they make [a] huge difference. I am grateful [that] food vouchers have [been] provided for summer holidays. They will be a great help during holidays.

Nellie K, who lives in England with two young children, talked about the importance of FSMs and the difference they made to her and her family. She was particularly grateful for the extra financial support during the summer holidays from her local authority and parish council:

Free school meals are a huge help for us. In particular the extended provision over the holidays has been very helpful. Especially now they've settled on a voucher system. I can get so much more out of the £15 a week than I was getting in food parcels, and I can buy exactly what my children will eat. This summer, for my one school-aged child, we are getting £75 from the city council, and an extra £25 from our parish council. It will really help us over the holidays.

This was echoed by Lois, who also mentioned how additional support over the holidays had helped to relieve some of the financial pressure she was feeling:

My son is on free school meals although he often prefers sandwiches or a packed lunch to take to school. But for us in terms of holidays, and when we've been on lockdown, the free school meal vouchers make a big difference and I know that at school if he wants to have a school meal then he can do and there's no issue with that. And what that does is just takes the pressure off me.

The way in which additional support was provided was also a frequent topic parents raised through Covid Realities. They expressed concern about the unsuitability of vouchers and the

⁹ The UK Cost of the School Day project, CPAG and Children North East, 2021

paucity (and sometimes demeaning nature) of what was provided in food parcels. Those parents who received cash support rather than vouchers or food parcels expressed a strong preference for support in this form. Trisha explained:

I receive help with free school meals from the education authority in [the] form of bank cheques (during lockdown and Christmas season). I am grateful for this gesture and I have nothing to complain about regarding this arrangement. With the cheque I have the flexibility to plan for my daughter's meals and prepare food that is nutritious as opposed to if I was getting ready to eat meals which perhaps would not be sufficient.

CPAG and Children North East's research with families during the first national lockdown found that 81% of families who were receiving direct payments said this method was working extremely well or very well for them. This was far higher than any other method. Families reported that this approach allowed flexibility, dignity, safety and convenience, which were all highly valued by parents.¹⁰

Many families have relied heavily on the support provided by local authorities to help pay for food and bills during recent school holidays. In England, the Covid Local Support Grant (previously the Covid Winter Grant Scheme) has enabled local authorities to offer FSM-eligible families cash, vouchers and food parcels during the school breaks. Separate schemes have been operating across the devolved nations. In England, provision is scheduled to end in September, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland families eligible for FSM will continue to receive replacements until April 2022. However, these costs won't disappear, so families will be left struggling once again.

While we know that food costs are significant, there are many other costs that place a burden on families such as utility bills and childcare. These costs need to be met throughout the year, but can often rise during holiday periods. That is why it is important to look at longer-term solutions for improving family finances so that parents can meet the multiple needs of their children throughout the year. As a first step, the £20 increase to universal credit and working tax credit should be kept.

Universal FSM

It is well documented that receiving FSMs can be stigmatising. Research from CPAG and Children North East's UK Cost of the School Day project shows that children who rely on FSMs can find themselves set apart from their peers if they are unable to choose from the same menu. For example, some schools serve only a hot meal to pupils eligible for FSM, and these pupils cannot choose a grab-and-go option instead. Other FSM-eligible children report having to sit apart from their friends who bring packed lunches from home, while some pupils face a limited choice because their allowance does not stretch to both a morning snack and a meal with a drink at lunchtime.¹¹ Importantly, some schools have taken steps to stigma-proof provision, as part of efforts to ensure that children can access free, targeted provision without

¹⁰ *The Cost of Learning in Lockdown*, CPAG, June 2020

¹¹ E Harwood, 'Discretion, dignity and choice: free school meals', *Poverty*, 169, CPAG, 2021, <https://askcpag.org.uk/content/206856/discretion--dignity-and-choice--free-school-meals>

fear of shame or bullying from their peers.¹² However, to fully remove the stigma associated with FSM, children must be able to consume the same food as their friends, paid for in the same way and eaten in the same space. Providing universal FSMs is a clear solution that helps to ensure no child misses out or feels embarrassed about receiving food at school.

Free school meals is not anonymous and has a low level of uptake because of this. (Dad with 2 children in school)¹³

“We know who has free school meals; when the dinner money letters go out they never have any letters but still have dinners in school. They don’t get [a letter] saying they need to pay” (Primary school pupil)¹⁴

Covid Realities participants expressed fears that their children will experience stigma (perhaps remembering their own experiences as a child), and this can sometimes mean those who would be eligible do not apply for this support. This is the experience of Erik J, a single father:

I do not currently receive free school meals for my daughter, although I believe I would be entitled to this as I am a single parent in receipt of employment and support allowance due to severe mental health issues, mainly due to being embarrassed and the stigma involved for her at school.

Research into universal infant FSMs in both England¹⁵ and Scotland¹⁶ shows that uptake increases significantly among FSM-eligible pupils when a universal approach is taken. Having a balanced meal each day has also been proven to support children’s learning and health, as well as relieving financial pressures on families. However, the current restrictive eligibility criteria means that many children and families miss out on these benefits, preventing children from making the most of their school day.

Fixing FSMs: what needs to change

It is clear that there are gaps in current FSM provision, and that factors surrounding FSM provision affect family life. We spoke to Covid Realities participants about what they would recommend in order to fix some of the current problems with FSMs.

¹² See *The Cost of Missing Lunchtime* report for further examples of the stigma faced by pupils and examples of action taken by schools to address barriers to FSM take-up: <https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/briefing/cost-missing-lunchtime-briefing-free-school-meals-north-east>

¹³ See Footnote 12

¹⁴ The UK Cost of the School Day project, CPAG and Children North East (2021)

¹⁵ A Holford and B Rabe, *Impact of the Universal Infant Free School Meal Policy*, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex, 2020

¹⁶ NHS Health Scotland, *Process evaluation of the implementation of universal free school meals (UFSM) for P1 to P3*, 2016

The participants felt that the ideal provision would be universal FSMs, which would cost an additional £1.8bn across the UK.¹⁷ They thought that FSMs should be a fundamental part of the school day, and part of wider efforts to create a more inclusive and nurturing school environment. We can think of universal FSMs as an investment in the country’s future, but this should not detract from the importance of childhood itself, in its own right, as a time of exploration, learning and adventure. Covid Realities participants also emphasised that there are some smaller steps that would greatly improve FSM provision in the short-term:

1. Extend means-tested FSMs to everyone on universal credit (or equivalent benefits) – this would ensure that almost every child in poverty would be eligible for FSMs at a cost of just £700m across the UK. Eligibility should also be extended to all families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF).
2. Following the Scottish Government’s lead, extend FSMs to all primary school children across the UK at a cost of £770m.¹⁸
3. To help improve family finances more broadly, including during pinch points like the holidays, the adequacy of the social security system must be reviewed. As a first step, the planned £20 cut to universal credit and working tax credit must be abandoned.

Table 2: Cost of FSM roll-out across the different nations

Country	Universal FSM for all pupils (£million)	Means-tested FSM (£million)	Universal primary FSMs (£million)
England	1540	620	675
Scotland	90	30	0
Wales	120	45	60
Northern Ireland	60	5	35
UK	1800	700	770

Conclusion

Progress towards universal FSM provision should be the central ambition, and here policymakers, politicians and academics can learn from and be inspired by Scotland’s pioneering approach to making all primary school pupils eligible by next year. Other nations could learn from this approach by increasing the scope of universal provision.

Alongside extended universal provision, there is an urgent need to extend the eligibility thresholds for means-tested FSMs, making sure that working families in poverty have access to this essential entitlement. As we cautiously emerge from the pandemic, there has never

¹⁷ All costings are additional to the current cost of provision across the different nations. Costs are authors’ calculations. For more details see the Methodology section.

¹⁸ As different nations currently have different levels of universal FSM provision, what extending to all primary school pupils entails will be country specific. In England, the cost would be to cover pupils in year 3 – 6, as infant pupils already receive a free meal each day. In Wales and Northern Ireland, the cost covers all pupils in infant years (reception, year 1 and year 2), as well as years 3-6. In Scotland the cost is 0 as they have already committed to rolling out FSM provision to all primary pupils.

been a more important time to target support at our children, children who have lost so much during the past two years. Making sure all our children have access to a decent meal during the school day should be a priority for governments across the UK.

About this report

This briefing has been written by Maddy Power (Wellcome Trust Research Fellow, University of York), Ruth Patrick (Lecturer in Social Policy, University of York), Tom Lee (Senior Policy Analyst, CPAG) and Kate Anstey (UK Cost of the School Day project lead, CPAG). They thank the Covid Realities participants who shared their experiences and developed the policy recommendations in partnership with the research team. This wider research team is made up of Jim Kaufman, Katie Pybus, Rosalie Warnock, Kayleigh Garthwaite and Geoff Page. Covid Realities is a research programme funded by the Nuffield Foundation (more details at www.covidrealities.org).

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Appendix 1: FSM provision across the UK

FSM provision and eligibility vary across the four nations of the UK, but as things currently stand there are elements of means-tested, income-based provision everywhere. There is also some universal provision in place for younger children across England and Scotland, as set out in Table 3. For instance, when children returned to school in Scotland in August, all children in primary four (the equivalent of year three in England and Wales) received FSMs as part of the Scottish Government's commitment to extend universal provision to all primary school pupils. Primary five children will be next, from January 2022, while those in primary one, primary two and primary three receive FSMs already.¹⁹ In Wales, there is no universal school lunch provision, but children in local authority-maintained primary schools can claim a free breakfast.²⁰ In England, a small number of local authorities have opted to make provision universal for primary pupils in their schools. However, there is no central government funding available for this.

Above a certain age threshold in England and Scotland (now steadily rising in Scotland), and at all ages in Wales and Northern Ireland, FSM provision depends on income levels and whether a household is in receipt of certain benefits. And importantly, across the UK, being in receipt of universal credit does not guarantee entitlement to FSMs. To be eligible as a universal credit claimant in England and Wales, your income (after tax and not including benefits) must be less than £7,400 per year. In Scotland it must be less than £7,320 per year, while in Northern Ireland the threshold is significantly higher at £14,000.

The income threshold for England, Wales and Scotland is low and there will be families with incomes significantly higher than this threshold who experience poverty and live far below the minimum income standard.²¹ And yet despite this daily experience of poverty, and of having to get by on a low income, families will not be able to access help with FSMs if there is no universal provision because of the rules governing their eligibility.

¹⁹ Scottish Government, *Free School Meals*, 2021, <https://www.gov.scot/news/free-school-meals-1/>

²⁰ CPAG, 'Over half of children in poverty missing out on Free School Meals', 2020, <https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/wales-over-half-children-poverty-missing-out-free-school-meals>

²¹ A Davis, D Hirsch, M Padley and C Shepherd, *A Minimum Income Standard for the United Kingdom in 2021*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2021, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/minimum-income-standard-uk-2021>

Table 3: FSM provision across the UK²²

	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Universal FSMs	Reception, year one, year two (ages 4-7)	No universal provision	Funded early learning, funded childcare, primary 1-4 (ages 4-8)	No universal provision
Income threshold for FSM eligibility for universal credit claimants	Below £7,400	Below £7,400	Below £7,320 (£610 per month)	Below £14,000
Income threshold for FSM eligibility for child tax credit claimants	Below £16,190 per year	Below £16,190 per year	Below £16,105 per year	Below £16,190 per year
Income threshold for FSM eligibility for working tax credit claimants	Cannot claim FSM except if receiving working tax credit run-on (the payment someone may receive for a further 4 weeks after they stop qualifying for working tax credit)	Cannot claim FSM except if receiving working tax credit run-on (the payment someone may receive for a further 4 weeks after they stop qualifying for working tax credit)	Below £7,330 (if claiming both child and working tax credit)	Below £16,190 per year

There are also issues with eligibility for those with no recourse to public funds, who do not have entitlement to FSMs despite their high risk of poverty and destitution.²³ During the pandemic, FSMs in England have been temporarily extended to eligible children with no recourse to public funds, but this is yet to be made permanent. In Scotland and Wales, it is at each council's discretion to provide FSM entitlements to these children.

²² In addition to variation between the four constituent nations of the UK, there can be variation within nations. For instance, some London local authorities provide FSMs to all primary school pupils. See: <https://www.islington.gov.uk/children-and-families/benefits-and-financial-support/free-school-meals-and-uniform-grant> and <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jun/05/london-council-launches-free-school-meals-pilot-scheme>

²³ No Recourse to Public Funds Network, 2021

If children live in England or Wales they will receive FSMs if their parent or guardian receives:

- Universal credit – if claimed from 2018, earned income must be below £7,400 year after tax (prior to 2018 there was no income threshold)
- Income support
- Income-based jobseeker's allowance
- State pension guarantee credit
- Income-based employment and support allowance
- Child tax credit (as long as not also receiving working tax credit and earning no more than £16,190)
- Working tax credit four week 'run-on' when work ends
- Support under part IV of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999

These eligibility rules create particular for cliff edges parents who move into work of more than a certain number of hours (16 hours for a lone parent), and then suddenly lose eligibility for FSMs. There are similar issues for parents subject to the benefit cap who then move into work. They escape the cap but then lose their FSMs eligibility if they are earning over £616 per month.²⁴

Rules vary in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but underpinning principles of selective, means-tested provision apply everywhere. Scotland's decision to work towards universal provision for all primary school-aged children is an important one, and has been justified as an investment in the country's children. Announcing the policy, Shirley Ann-Somerville MSP, Education Secretary for the Scottish Government, said:

*Free school meals are a vital support to thousands of children and young people across the country – ensuring that children have access to a free, healthy and nutritious meal every day they are in school and are ready to engage in learning.*²⁵

The patchwork of FSM provision across the UK was subject to criticism well before the pandemic.²⁶ There is a longstanding concern that selective provision can be stigmatising, while there are related concerns that take up can be lower for means-tested support, leading to children missing out on often much-needed help.²⁷ This also has implications for school funding. Across England, Scotland and Wales, schools receive additional funding for every child that claims FSMs. If uptake is low and eligible families do not claim, schools lose out on this funding, funding that could be used to pay for breakfast clubs or additional resources like laptops that benefit all children in the school.

²⁴ CPAG, *Expanding Eligibility for Free School Meals in England*, 2020, <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/CPAG-FSM-briefing-2020.pdf>

²⁵ S Pacioroni, 'Free school meals in Scotland to be expanded to 90,000 additional children', *The Herald*, 5 June 2021, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/19352244.free-school-meals-scotland-expanded-90-000-additional-children/>

²⁶ Food Foundation, *A Year of Children's Food*, 2020, https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CR2F_ProgressBriefing_A4_PROOF10.pdf

²⁷ P Sahota, J Woodward, R Molinari and J Pike, Factors influencing take-up of free school meals in primary- and secondary-school children in England, *Public Health Nutr*, 2014, Jun;17(6):1271-9. doi: 10.1017/S136898001300092X. Epub 2013 Apr 11. PMID: 23578731.

Appendix 2: Methodology

In order to estimate the share of children in poverty who miss out on FSMs it was necessary to nowcast the income distribution. To model the labour market impact of COVID-19, we estimated regression models using the May 2021 wave of Understanding Society data for:

- Probability of being furloughed
- Probability of losing job (for non-furloughed employees)
- Probability of reduced hours worked (for still employed, non-furloughed employees)
- Probability of not working for the self-employed
- Probability of reduced hours worked (for still working self-employed)

This gives the probability of an individual with given characteristics ending up in one of these groups. These coefficients are then applied to the Family Resource Survey (FRS) dataset to get an estimate for the likelihood of an individual in the FRS falling into these categories. Individuals were then randomly assigned to categories based on their probabilities and observed external data on the number of people in different categories in May.

The nowcasted labour market outcomes were then passed through a tax-benefit microsimulation model (UKMOD) to provide the post-tax-benefit income distribution. However, this approach gives the income distribution in May 2020.

The number of people in different states changed throughout the year as some people returned to work (on the same hours), some returned on reduced hours and some were made unemployed. Therefore some people randomly assigned to be furloughed were re-assigned to previous employment, reduced hours, or unemployment in order to get a nowcast which best reflected 2020/21 as a whole.

These nowcasted labour market outcomes were then passed through UKMOD to estimate the post-tax-benefit income distribution. Emergency policy measures including the £20 increase to universal credit and working tax credit, local housing allowance uprating and suspension of the minimum income floor were included in the estimation. Careful attention was paid to make sure the number of households on universal credit matched external data.

From these data, eligibility for means-tested free-school meals could be estimated based on household earnings. However, these numbers do not cover every aspect of FSMs. It was then important to adjust for transitional protection and universal FSMs programmes across different parts of the UK. These numbers were compared to administrative data to ensure the modelling was robust. From this underlying data it was then possible to estimate the number/share of children in poverty not covered by any form of FSM provision as well as the cost of rolling out new forms of FSM provision.

Costings were calculated using a FSM cost of £2.50 a day, assumed means-tested roll-out take-up of 90% and universal roll-out of 70%, in line with take-up rates from existing programs.

Appendix 3: About Covid Realities/Child Poverty Action Group

The Covid Realities research programme is a partnership between the Universities of York and Birmingham, and Child Poverty Action Group. It is funded by the Nuffield Foundation. Since April 2020, Covid Realities has worked directly with over 100 parents and carers living on a low income, documenting their experiences during the pandemic and developing recommendations for change. Parents have completed online diaries, responded to video ‘big questions of the week’ and taken part in virtual discussion groups (‘big ideas groups’), where we explored what needs to change and why.

Across diary entries, the issue of access to food was a recurring theme, itself rooted in and explicitly tied to a lack of sufficient income. We heard a lot about the problems with replacements to FSMs when the schools were closed, but also about families who missed out on help because of their income sitting slightly above the threshold for FSMs eligibility. In this report, we include diary extracts but also responses to a big question of the week, posed in July 2021, which asked specifically about eligibility and experiences of FSM provision. The question asked was: Do you get free school meals and what difference do they make?

Child Poverty Action Group works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn’t have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children’s lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high-profile legal work to establish and protect families’ rights. Child Poverty Action Group is a charity registered in England and Wales (registration number 294841) and in Scotland (registration number SC039339).