

## Free School Meals survey results (Published April 2023)

*“Due to a part-time timetable due to medical reasons and anxiety, my son has not been in school for lunch. He is just starting to stay for two lunchtimes a week but cannot access the food yet because of his anxiety.” Parent carer.*

*“Other bills have gone unpaid. I spend so much on food now that council tax and electricity bills have mounted up and we are in a very poor place financially.” Parent carer.*

### Background

Contact is a UK held an online survey at the beginning of March 2023 about access to free school meals for eligible disabled children.

The survey questions were co-produced and tested with parent carers before the survey was launched.

The survey was promoted to Contact’s network of families, parent support groups and charities. It was also promoted to a parent-led campaign group calling for equal access to free school meals for all eligible children.

There were 1800 survey responses from families with disabled children, of which 1500 were eligible for free school meals. Their eligibility is either under the Universal offer (Reception to Y2 in England) or benefit-related offer (low income and in receipt of certain benefits).

The findings were published on our webpage and shared across our networks: [Contact calls for free school meals vouchers as 1/3 eligible disabled children miss out | Contact](#)

### Summary of findings

A third of eligible disabled children are unable to access their free school meal. Their families are missing out on the equivalent of £570 a year of financial help at a time when every penny counts.

This is causing families to get into debt and turn to foodbanks for help, as well as increasing stress and making children feel left out.



### **Key findings (based on 1500 eligible responses):**

In total 471 (33%) have children who can't access their free school meal for a variety of reasons:

- 45% can't eat due to dietary requirements or sensory processing difficulties
- 22% are off school due to a long-term illness or medical condition
- 15% can't eat in the canteen due to sensory needs
- 11% have EOTAS (Education Otherwise than at School), similar to home education
- 7% are off school waiting for a suitable school place
- 6% attend a school without a canteen

Of those getting a free school meal in some way (67%):

- 69% get their free school meal in their school/college canteen
- 15% supermarket vouchers
- 15% personal budget due to child being EOTAS
- 9% payment directly to bank account

### **Impact of not getting a school meal entitlement**

When asked about the impact of their child missing out on their free school meal, 85% of families said it increased pressure on their weekly budgets.

In addition:

- 67% experienced more stress as a result
- 22% got into debt or had to borrow money
- 21% reported it made their child feel left
- 16% needed to use a foodbank

### **Duration eligible disabled children have been missing out on their free school meal**

For those missing out:

- 28% have never been able to access their free school meal
- 32% have not been able to access them for 2 or more years.

*"My child was in school until Year 3 and was unable to have school meals due to a severe wheat allergy. Due to her autism and severe anxiety she was unable to attend school from Year 3 and is now home schooled. So she has never got what she is entitled to, even though I filled in the free school meal form for the school when she started." A parent carer*



### **Costs of missing out on a free school meal**

For those missing out, their families say:

49% of families are paying £20 a week providing meals or packed lunches to replace the free school meals their disabled children are missing out on

20% are spending £10 each week.

18% are paying £30 per week

*"I am struggling massively to finance everything. My child has to have specific foods and packaging which have to be found in different shops, due to sensory processing difficulties." A parent carer.*

*"Due to a part-time timetable due to medical reasons and anxiety, my son has not been in school for lunch. He is just starting to stay for two lunchtimes a week but cannot access the food yet because of his anxiety." A parent carer.*

### **Duration eligible disabled children have been missing out on their free school meal**

- 28% have never been able to access their FSM
- 18% have not had their FSM for 3 years
- 17% have not had their FSM for 1 year
- 14% have not had their FSM for 2 years

*"My child was in school until Year 3 and was unable to have school meals due to a severe wheat allergy. Due to her autism and severe anxiety she was unable to attend school from Year 3 and is now home schooled. So she has never got what she is entitled to, even though I filled in the free school meal form for the school when she started." A parent carer.*

### **Costs of missing out on a free school meal**

Currently a free school meal is valued at £3 per day. There are 190 days in a school year, so that's £570 of financial help over the course of a year that some disabled children are missing out on.

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49% of families are paying £20 a week providing meals or packed lunches to replace the free school meals their disabled children are missing out on

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*"I am struggling massively to finance everything. My child has to have specific foods and packaging which have to be found in different shops, due to sensory processing difficulties." A parent carer.*



### **Impact of missing out on the free school meal**

When asked about the impact of their child missing out on their free school meal, 85% of families said it increased pressure on their weekly budgets.

In addition:

- 67% experienced more stress as a result
- 22% got into debt or had to borrow money
- 21% reported it made their child feel left
- 18% made them feel alone/isolated in the school community
- 17% said it caused conflict with school/local authority
- 16% needed to use a foodbank
- 10% said it affected child's education

*"We have really struggled to buy enough food for the family, borrowing money on occasion, having to go to free food schemes like libraries, food hubs and community groups to access free or reduced price food to top us up. This isn't helped by the cost of living crisis and the medication my daughter is on that increases her appetite." A parent carer.*

*"The extra food costs mean I can't provide my other child the dairy free and soya free diet she needs properly. I have sacrificed not eating and drinking enough leading to me being poorly with a kidney infection." A parent carer.*

*"I had to cut down on healthy food for myself because of his dietary requirements which in the end contributed to me developing diabetes." A parent carer*

*"We are buying cheaper foods, buying less food, so smaller meals with no frills. Nutritional deficiencies and nutrition related health problems." A parent carer*

### **Making a Reasonable Adjustments**

The law says that public bodies such as school and councils must make '[reasonable adjustments](#)' to make sure disabled people are not discriminated against or treated unfavourably.

For those not getting a free school meal in any way, we asked:

Have you asked for an alternative from your school/local authority?

11% Yes, have been awarded an alternative such as a voucher

7% Yes, they are looking into it

13% Yes, I was refused

54% No, didn't know I could ask

10% No, not had the time or energy



### **What parent told us they want**

Many parents simply don't have the energy to fight for their child's free school meal, because they have so many other battles including getting therapies, suitable school and equipment for their child.

That's why we are campaigning alongside parents to get alternatives offered to children who can't access their free school meals in the regular way.

We want to see supermarket vouchers or personal budgets offered consistently across the country to those children entitled to a free school meal but missing out.

This would ensure disabled children don't face discrimination and parents aren't faced with a postcode lottery.

In addition, the [Free School Meals Guidance](#) should be updated to make clear that local authorities and schools must provide free school meals, in some form, to disabled children who can't access them in the regular way.

The guidance should include information on alternative ways ([reasonable adjustments](#)) to provide free school meals to pupils not in school or unable to eat a regular meal due to their disability. This might include offering a supermarket voucher.

What parent told us they want to happen:

*"My eldest accesses free school meals at school. Youngest is discriminated against due to being EOTAS and no one taking responsibility for his right to access free lunches. Fighting for my children's basic rights has affected my health – I have ME now." A parent carer*

*"I feel like sensory needs are seen as fussiness and not catered for or even understood." A parent carer*

*"If there was a way of using their free school meal budget money towards their packed lunches it would be life changing and I could buy more of a variety of fruit and veg." A parent carer.*

*"Home educated children should get their free school meals entitlement through vouchers as many are out of school as a result of inability to cope in school." A parent carer*