

# Addressing Poverty Through School Food

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## Introduction

We know "well-nourished children focus better and learn more in the classroom, leading to better performance" (WHO 2023). This is why it is so important all Bradford children can access a nutritious meal within the school day. However, stigma and barriers around the administration of practices surrounding food and food poverty can prevent children from seeking help, impacting their accessibility to nutritious meals within school (Child of the North, 2024 & The Food Foundation, 2019).

In the Poverty Proofing© the School Day Bradford sample by Children North East, food was identified as a priority area for action in almost all primary schools. Children North East, identified four areas within this context that need further work.

In **84%** of schools, **administration and communication of lunch money debts were unclear and/or involved pupils** - *'Everyone puts the money in the register.'* (pupil)

In **38%** of schools, **school meals were considered too expensive** - *'The daily Free School Meal allowance is £2.40, which can be used to buy a meal deal at lunchtime, but it does not cover the cost of a large meal deal at £3.00.'* (pupil)

In **76%** of schools, there were **issues** surrounding the perception of **food quality** - *'I just go up and point, I'm not sure what it is half of the time.'* (pupil)





In **25%** of the schools there was a **lower than expected take up in Free School Meals**, particularly in Reception and Key Stage One meaning eligible children were missing out on their entitlement.

In **30%** of schools, the **lunchtime experience was noisy/ unpleasant** - *'It's really noisy, you have to shout if you want to be heard.'* (pupil)

Use this document to consider your school food offer with an income inequality lens. For more ideas, visit the [Child Poverty Action Group Website](#).



## Questions To Ask Your School

	Question	Page
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there a transparent system for dealing with the accrual of debt?</li> <li>• Are parents aware of the financial help available to them? For example, <a href="#">Healthy Start Vouchers</a>.</li> <li>• Does your school ensure that no child is denied food because their parents owe money?</li> </ul>	<u>4</u>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can another child tell if a pupil paid for meals?</li> <li>• Is there support for parents to sign up for Free School Meals (FSM)? Do parents know about how to sign up?</li> <li>• If there is a school trip, is there a difference in how packed lunches are provided for pupils who do or do not pay for meals?</li> <li>• Would another pupil be able to tell if a pupil paid for milk or not?</li> <li>• Are there other opportunities (outside of lunchtimes) to access free food in school?</li> </ul>	<u>6</u>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are pupils involved in developing school lunches?</li> <li>• Do families understand what the school meals are like?</li> <li>• Do your school meals represent the pupils and families in your school community?</li> <li>• Can pupils sit with their friends at lunchtime?</li> </ul>	<u>8</u>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there a fair way to allocate any second helping across year groups and lunch settings?</li> <li>• Do catering staff know vulnerable pupils so they can adjust portion sizes without drawing any attention?</li> <li>• Do you signpost families in need of further support, for example, <a href="#">Bradford Foodbanks</a> or <a href="#">Cost of Living Bradford</a>?</li> </ul>	<u>10</u>

## Dealing With Debt

### What Citizens Say



*'I don't know what help I could get with paying for things like dinners.' (parent)*

*'I got loads of letters from school and had to go on packed lunch.' (pupil)*

### What Your School Can Do?

#### Barriers

**Communication around debt being highlighted to the pupil** via a letter passed home or the message passed to the pupil can create stigma and worry.

**The wording used around what happens in the case of dinner money debt** on the website or in person can make families feel they are unable to reach out for support or that their child may go hungry.

**Conversations with parents around dinner money debt** can be daunting and bring up feelings of dread in families.

**Families may not know where to turn around money issues** and ways of resolving their debt.

#### Guidance

- Have a **transparent system for dealing with debt accrual that doesn't highlight it to the child**, e.g., emailing parents.
- Make sure dinner staff and teachers are aware of this system.
- **Think about font and tone in the communication around dinner money debt.**
- Avoid FULL WORDS IN CAPITALS and strong wording like "neglect," "action will be taken," and "unacceptable."
- Be clear on the steps to take if they are struggling and offer a key contact for parents to connect.
- When conversing with parents about dinner money debt, ensure they are **sympathetic and centred on providing support** rather than chasing or removing provisions.
- **Signpost families to support and advice services** for example [Credit Union Bradford](#), [Cost of Living Bradford](#), or local community organisations.
- Ask families signing up for Free School Meals if they have a child under four or are pregnant, as they may be eligible for [Healthy Start vouchers](#).



## Barriers

## Guidance

Families may not realise that in **KS2 they have to pay for School Meals.**

- At **multiple opportunities and in different ways, promote Free School Meals** and the process of signing up.
- Could you have direct conversations with families you think may be eligible to encourage sign-up?

## Case Study

### Bradford School



All staff said that conversations with parents regarding dinner money debt are sympathetic and centred on providing support for the families, rather than chasing them. ***'If you chase something, it moves further away.'***

In the past, school has written off some debt and set up realistic instalment plans in other cases. No child is denied food because their parents owe money.



## Free School Meals

It is important to ensure that all eligible families are signed up for free school meals and to explore why eligible children may not be receiving one. A quick way of telling if the Free School Meal sign-up is accurate is by comparing it to your Pupil Premium data.

For more information about eligibility and Free School Meals, visit [Gov. uk](https://www.gov.uk).

### What Citizens Say



*'I don't know what help I could get with paying for things like dinners.'* (parent)

### What Your School Can Do?

#### Barriers

Families may not understand **or worry about why they need to provide their details**, such as their national insurance number when applying for Free School Meals.

**Parents may not know they are eligible.**

**Parents may not feel able to complete the application** for Free School Meals on their own.

Their **circumstances may have changed**, making them eligible for Free School Meals.

#### Guidance

- **Explain the application process** and how the information will be used by families to put them at ease and build trust.

- Sign up children for Free School Meals at the **same time as having conversations around Pupil Premium**.
- Within **newsletter/letters** home, remind parents and encourage them to apply
- Having a **notice on school webpages**
- Free Schools Meals sign up as a **mandatory part of the admissions** process, all parents to apply for their child, even if they don't think they are eligible.

- Have a **designated staff member** at school who supports Free School Meal applications. It is their role to support and promote applications.

- If made aware of circumstances changing for families, have a **conversation to recheck their eligibility**.



## Discreet Administration of Free School Meals

### What Citizens Say



*'Miss says these are the packed lunches for those on Free School Meals. They come in a brown paper bag'. (pupil) 'I feel a bit scruffy when I'm holding my bag'. (pupil)*

*'Mine goes green because I pay for my dinners'. (pupil)*

### What Your School Can Do?

#### Barriers

**Small details in the dinner hall or at registration can indicate** which pupils have Free School Meals. This can prevent the uptake of Free School Meals.

**Milk distribution** can be highlighted for those who may not be able to buy milk, which means some pupils may miss out.

**The way Free School Meals are distributed on trips** could prevent pupils from wanting them. Parents may not know their children will be able to have a Free School Meal on a trip.

#### Guidance

- To make sure pupils cannot identify those who do or do not pay for meals.
- Have a **virtual cashless school, no lunch money in classrooms, and no identifying factors** in the dinner hall or at registration.

- Can a **milk jug** be provided at lunch so all pupils can access it, and there is no cost attached to it for any families?

- Explain to families **how they order the Free School Meal for trips**.
- Could you bring more than what was allocated for those who have forgotten?
- **Make sure the disputation is discrete.**

### Case Study

Bradford  
Schools



During Eid, those children who are eligible for Free School Meals and are fasting have **opportunity to take a packed lunch home** to have in the evening, meaning they are not missing out.

Numerous students told Children North East that there was a good choice of food, plus tea and coffee, **'it's a nice place to go; enough time to eat and a good choice,'** and many value it as social time to catch up with friends.



## Food Experiences

Simply providing a free school meal does not mean that pupils will eat it. As highlighted above, improving the food experience may support the take-up of free school meals (Sahota et al., 2013).

For more information on improving the dining experience, visit the [CONNECTS Food Website](#).

### What Citizens Say



- *'The chicken tikka is spicy and I can handle spice because I have spicy food at home.'* (pupil)
- *'I bring packed lunch some days and school meals the rest.' 'It is okay to do that.' 'You can sit wherever you want.'* (pupil)

### What Your School Can Do?

#### Barriers

When families don't know what the pupils are eating, they may be scared to let them have school meals.

When pupils don't recognise the food or its taste, they may not take advantage of the opportunity to have a Free School Meal.

Where pupils with school dinners have to sit in a different space to packed lunches, pupils on Free School Meals may be less likely to take them up as they want to sit with their friends.

#### Guidance

- Catering staff could offer taster days for families to experience school food together to promote take-up of school meals.

- Make the school meals varied with culturally diverse food options available at all lunch sittings representing the school community.

- Let pupils who chose school dinners or packed lunches sit together.





## Case Study

Bradford  
Schools



Pupils are highly appreciative and fond of seeing the Headteacher around at lunch time, they value the time they get to spend together. ***'I like it when the Headteacher sits with us for lunch because you can see she's a real person.'*** (pupil)

Also food is culturally represented of the demographic, ***'There is Halal food.'*** (pupil)

**The school provide each class with a budget** of £40. The teachers are able to go and purchase any supplies needed for the celebration, removing the need for pupils to bring in anything from home.

***'The teachers brought in the food for the party.'*** (pupil)



## Food Quantity and Quality

Food quality is important as it can dictate the uptake of Free School Meals, and quantity is important as it may be the only hot healthy meal that a child gets during the day (Veg Power, 2024). If you are aware of children vulnerable to or experiencing food poverty, you can direct them to the [Cost Of Living Bradford](#) website for more support.

### What Citizens Say



*'If you're the last class you get more on your plate as there is more left, otherwise you don't get enough to fill you.' (pupil)*

*'We spend more time talking to the children about the food we offer in the dining room- this has positively impacted on their view of school meals.' (staff)*

### What Your School Can Do?

#### Barriers

Pupils not on the last lunchtime slot may **feel they are not able to access** seconds of their school meal.

Pupils can often have strong opinions on the foods they eat but may **not know how, where, or who to share them with** and may not think anything will change if they do.

Pupils who are still hungry may not want to feel 'greedy' by asking for seconds, so they **may not ask**.

**Coming to or being hungry in school** can make it harder for pupils to learn and concentrate.

#### Guidance

- Ensure that all pupils are **made aware that they can have seconds** if they feel they need it.

- **Pupils, for example, food ambassadors, could work with catering staff** to provide feedback on or develop lunches.

- **Ensure catering staff know who vulnerable pupils are** so they can adjust portions without drawing any attention.
- **Free/subsidised breakfast club**, find more information on breakfast clubs at the [National School Breakfast Programme](#)
- Consider reaching out to local businesses. They could provide extra food during breaks.
- Actively promote the nearest no-cost/low-cost food provision, use [Bradford Food Banks](#) to find your local provision.



## Additional

Bradford  
School



Each week the school has a food sale for parents to access, 'We work with **Rethink Food**, it costs us around £2,500 each year. For that school gets delivered seven crates of food each week that would have otherwise been thrown out. We ask families to bring a bag and £1 and they can fill their bags with 7 or 8 items from the selection.' (staff)

When speaking to families that use this service, they explained that they felt 'Very comfortable [using the food sale]. We use the £1 fill a bag shop every week and it is amazing. **With all the things I get it means I can take it off my weekly shop the next day and save so much!**' (parent)



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If you have any feedback on this document or good practice that your school is doing, **we would love to hear from you.**

Please email [schools@mylivingwell.co.uk](mailto:schools@mylivingwell.co.uk).

