2022 England
School Meals Report

From ParentPay, Cypad and LACA

ParentPay
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Cypad

LACA

Contents

Who we are

ParentPay

ParentPay Group is the UK's largest education technology business, trusted by schools UK-wide to deliver a seamless cashless payment and paperless meal management service. Our products use cloud-based technology to streamline processes, improve engagement with parents and simplify meal management for catering teams and schools. It's no wonder 11,000 schools and 200 Local Authorities across the UK trust ParentPay to take their payments and meals paperless.

www.parentpay.com

Cypad

Cypad is the technology behind the specialist meal & kitchen management solutions within the ParentPay Group, which fully integrate with our key group products. Designed to provide a paperless catering management solution across single or multiple sites, Cypad allows kitchens to become fully digital and centralised, whether you are a MAT managing school meals in-house, a contract caterer with a school meal contract with hundreds of schools or a single primary school with a school cook. Using Cypad technology, ParentPay Group can help you maximise and maintain the safeguarding of your pupils and give parents total peace of mind.

www.parentpay.com/cypad

LACA

Established in 1989, LACA is the leading body representing professional catering managers and chefs working in the school sector across local authorities, private contractors, and individual schools and academies. Since its inception, LACA has set out to inform, develop, represent and support its members through a range of initiatives and services which include:

- Campaigning and lobbying industry and Government to improve the school food service.

- National and regional events and networking opportunities including the annual LACA Main Event and School Food Show.

- Competitions to promote excellence in school food including School Chef of the Year and Finishing Touches.

- Learning and development tools and support including allergen risk assessment guides, menu checking services and e-learning courses.

Find out more about LACA and the benefits of membership at:
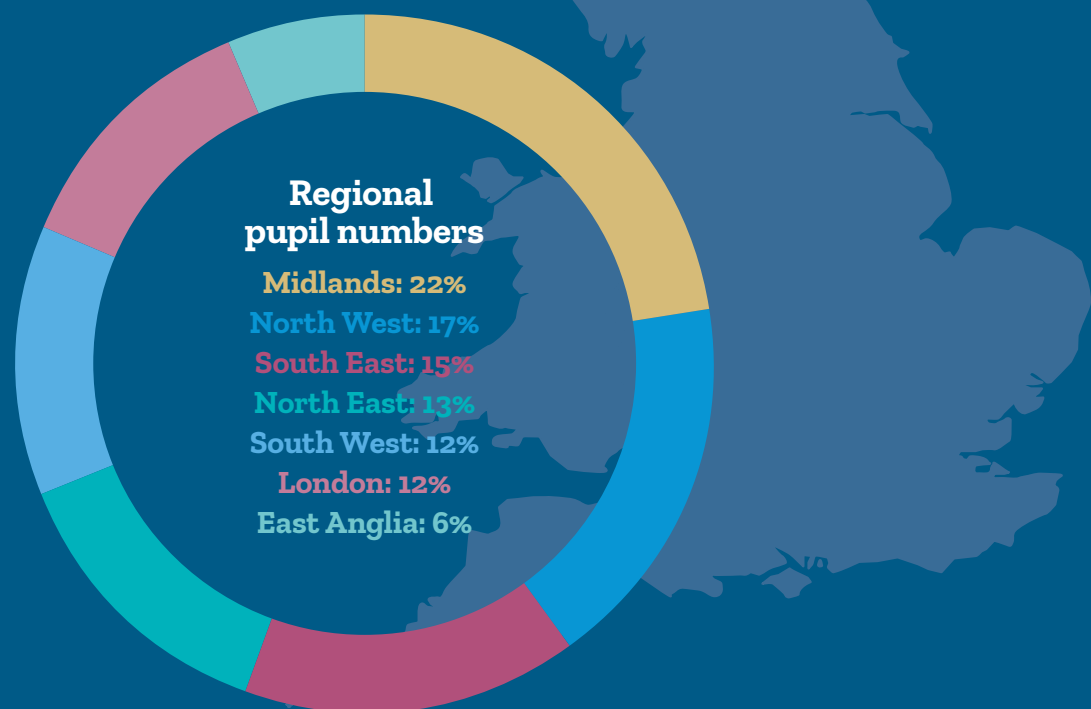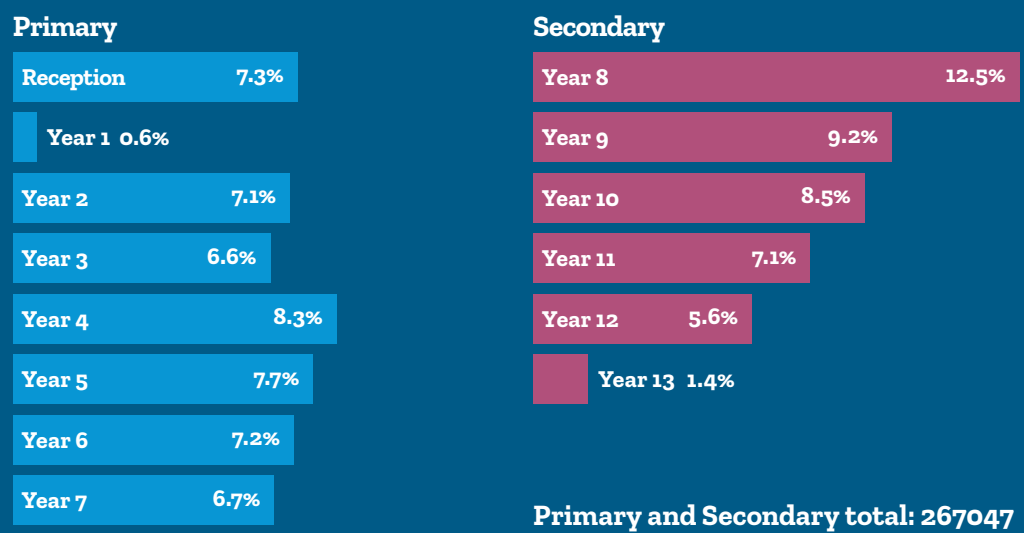
www.laca.co.uk

Introduction

The aim of this research is to understand the parental view on the school meal service and offering available to their children. Building on the success of the 2021 survey, ParentPay, Cypad and LACA have again conducted one of the largest studies ever undertaken with parents on school meal provision in the UK.

The survey attracted an overwhelmingly positive response of over 267,047 survey completions, providing an extremely robust overall sample size.

This study helps us to understand what caterers and school leadership teams need to do to ensure their customers and families are happy with the service provided, with this report covering school meal provision within the region of England specifically.

Regional pupil numbers

Midlands: 22%
North West: 17%
South East: 15%
North East: 13%
South West: 12%
London: 12%
East Anglia: 6%

School age of children in England

Primary

Reception	7.3%
Year 1	0.6%
Year 2	7.1%
Year 3	6.6%
Year 4	8.3%
Year 5	7.7%
Year 6	7.2%
Year 7	6.7%

Secondary

Year 8	12.5%
Year 9	9.2%
Year 10	8.5%
Year 11	7.1%
Year 12	5.6%
Year 13	1.4%

Primary and Secondary total: 267047

Meal provision

School meal provision chosen

- Home packed lunch: 17%
- School meal: 57%
- Mixture of both: 26%

Reasons for choosing school meals

Reason	%
Hot meal	60%
Convenience	39%
Nutritional	37%
Free school meal	37%
Try new foods	34%
Friends have it	16%
Good value	13%
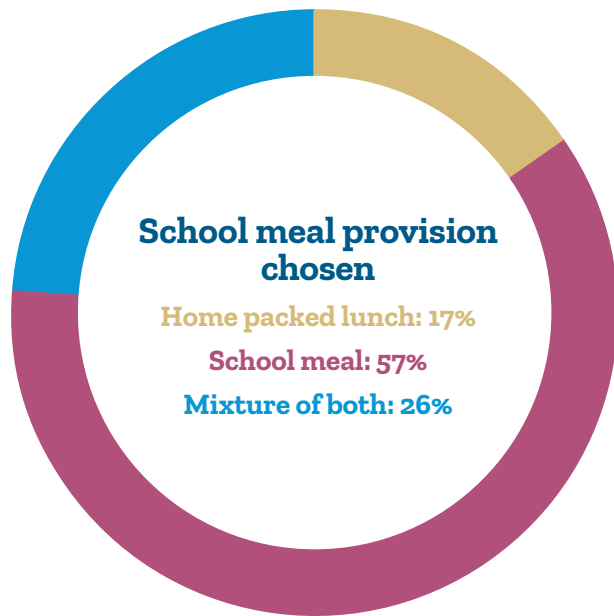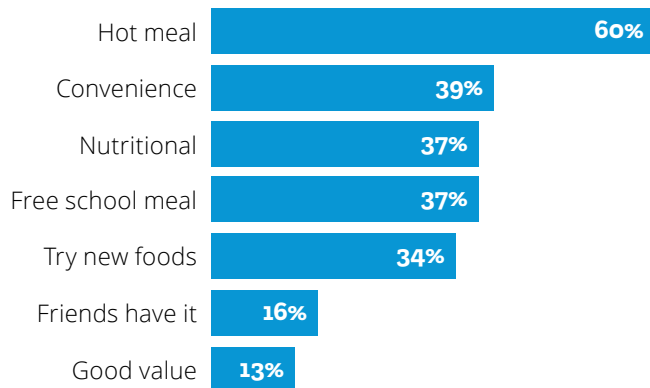
School meal selection

By region within primary schools	North East	North West	Midlands	East Anglia	South West	South East	London	Other
Total number of pupils	16723	22415	30654	6543	19254	17359	13981	883
Home packed lunch	16.3%	17.2%	17.6%	18.4%	18.1%	18.2%	13.6%	13.8%
School meal more than four days per week	64.2%	63.8%	56.5%	52.1%	53.6%	52.4%	64.4%	66.3%
A mixture	19.5%	19.0%	26.0%	29.5%	28.3%	29.3%	22.0%	19.9%

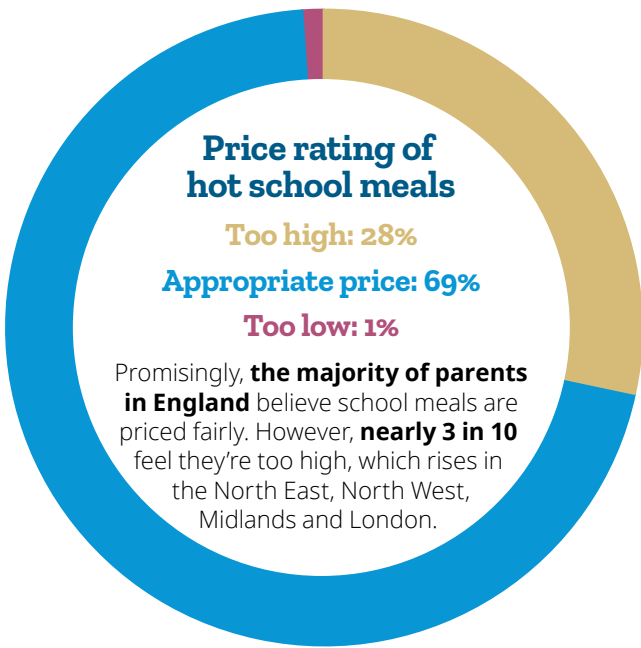| By region within secondary schools	North East	North West	Midlands	East Anglia	South West	South East	London	Other
Total number of pupils	14109	19945	22487	7009	11377	18962	14777	716
Home packed lunch	12.8%	12.2%	17.6%	19.1%	21.6%	19.6%	12.2%	10.3%
School meal more than four days per week	64.1%	64.3%	52.1%	48.3%	45.6%	49.1%	60.9%	65.8%
A mixture	23.1%	23.5%	30.3%	32.6%	32.8%	31.2%	26.9%	23.9%

83% of pupils in England

are having a school meal at least once a week.

Nearly 60% of children

are having a school meal every day, with a quarter switching between school meals and packed lunches.

Both primary and secondary school respondents in England say the top two reasons for choosing school meals are **to get a hot meal** and for **the convenience it provides**.
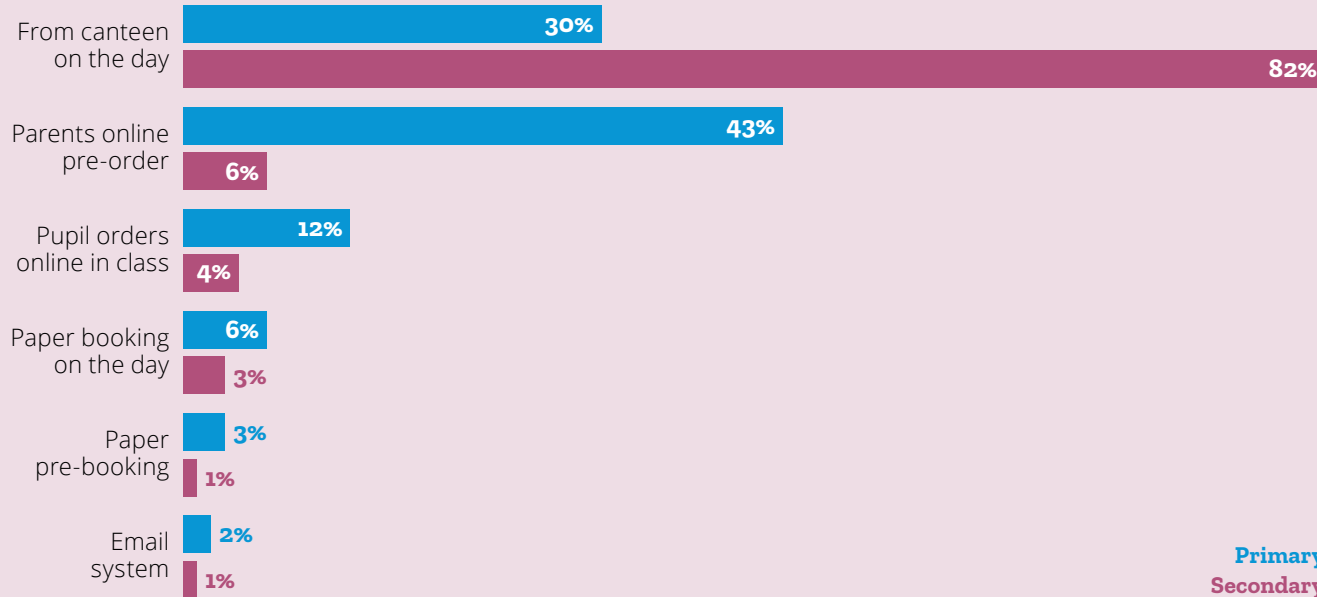
Price rating of hot school meals

Too high: 28%

Appropriate price: 69%

Too low: 1%

Promisingly, **the majority of parents in England** believe school meals are priced fairly. However, **nearly 3 in 10** feel they're too high, which rises in the North East, North West, Midlands and London.

Price rating of hot school meals

By region within primary schools	North East	North West	Midlands	East Anglia	South West	South East	London
Too low	0.71%	0.59%	0.81%	0.97%	0.87%	0.84%	1.13%
Priced appropriately	62.09%	61.37%	58.32%	63.34%	62.25%	59.52%	56.72%
Too high	35.00%	35.83%	38.64%	33.71%	34.97%	37.49%	39.04%

By region within secondary schools	North East	North West	Midlands	East Anglia	South West	South East	London
Too low	0.68%	0.66%	0.75%	0.64%	0.85%	0.71%	1.53%
Priced appropriately	74.01%	73.95%	75.53%	77.95%	79.56%	78.55%	73.11%
Too high	23.53%	23.24%	21.88%	19.44%	17.92%	19.00%	22.57%

Method of choosing school meals

Method	Primary	Secondary
From canteen on the day	30%	82%
Parents online pre-order	43%	6%
Pupil orders online in class	12%	4%
Paper booking on the day	6%	3%
Paper pre-booking	3%	1%
Email system	2%	1%

Primary
Secondary

Does the pupil get the meal they want or choose?

When they can't pre-order meals?
- 45%
- 35%
- 20%

When they can pre-order meals?
- 61%
- 21%
- 18%

Yes
No
Don't know
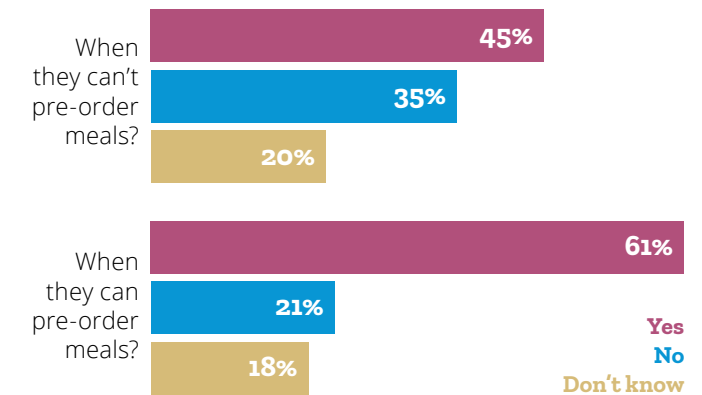
Digital meal pre-ordering

further increases caterers' ability to deliver the chosen meal for each pupil and allows parents to confirm that the chosen meal was taken.

How to increase meal uptake

Impact of the dining environment

The dining environment has more of an impact in secondary, with nearly **6 in 10 stating that it does have an impact on school meal take-up**. This trend is reversed in primary.

Primary
Yes: 39%   No: 61%

Secondary
Yes: 58%   No: 42%
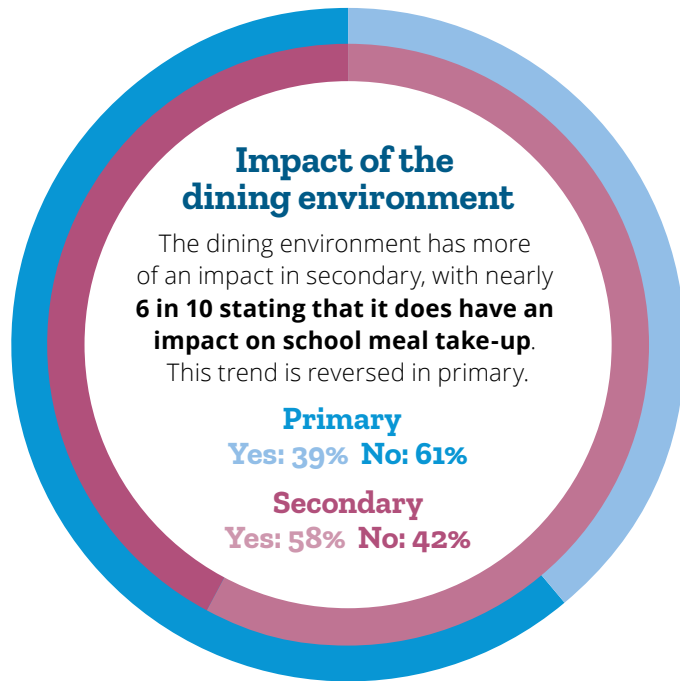
Does the dining environment play a part in deciding whether your child would take a school lunch?:

" Having sufficient time in a designated area influences what my child wants to take. She has free school meals, but sometimes not having the options available does make her request a packed lunch."

" As long as it's clean environment, I don't mind."

" No, long as they get to sit and eat!"

" The queue is too long and there isn't enough time to eat due to staggered dining times."

" No to eating in classrooms. Should be space for everyone to be seated (they often have to sit outside)."

Nearly 40% of parents surveyed

said their school offer a breakfast option – however, **30% of parents** say their school doesn't provide breakfast. Of this 30% whose school doesn't offer breakfast, **the majority said it's something they'd like schools to provide**, with the majority again willing to pay for breakfast provision if it was provided.

Willingness or ability to pay for breakfast if it was provided

Yes: 87%

No: 5%

Unsure: 8%

The top 3 factors

that would encourage increased school meal take up triangulate around having a **wider selection** of meals, meals being **better quality or more appetising**, and **lower cost**. Advance selection is also a factor for 1 in 4 parents. Parents who use packed lunches specifically in the North East, North West and Midlands want more ways for parents to be able to select meals (more pre-ordering).

Themed meals

are of interest to **nearly 80% of surveyed parents** as being a factor in them choosing more school meal provision. **Holiday celebration themes** such as Eid, Chinese New Year, and Christmas were the most popular at 56% of respondents. North West parents are more likely to choose **holiday celebration-themed meals**. A higher percentage of parents in the South East and London would like to see **more meat-free days**.

Reasons that would increase the frequency of parents choosing school meals

By region within primary schools	North East	North West	Midlands	East Anglia	South West	South East	London	Other
	2730	**3845**	**5382**	**1203**	**3476**	**3163**	**1905**	**122**
Better quality or more appetising meals	44.6%	42.9%	46.7%	45.1%	47.6%	48.6%	56.5%	42.6%
Wider selection of meal choices	44.2%	43.8%	46.8%	45.8%	45.8%	48.0%	46.6%	50.8%
Lower costs for hot school meals	40.4%	38.9%	40.3%	40.7%	38.1%	34.4%	33.2%	36.9%
More ways for parents or pupils to select meals in advance	28.6%	30.3%	25.8%	15.0%	16.1%	18.9%	28.7%	32.0%
More information on school meal nutrition	6.3%	9.4%	8.0%	7.4%	7.6%	7.9%	13.2%	9.8%
More options for special diet types	6.4%	8.4%	8.5%	7.3%	7.1%	9.3%	13.1%	6.6%
Easier parent meal booking	9.6%	10.5%	9.0%	8.3%	8.5%	6.8%	12.0%	10.7%
Increased confidence in allergen management	3.6%	4.0%	4.3%	3.9%	4.0%	3.8%	6.2%	2.5%

By region within secondary schools	North East	North West	Midlands	East Anglia	South West	South East	London	Other
	1810	**2443**	**3950**	**1340**	**2458**	**3724**	**1799**	**74**
Better quality or more appetising meals	43.8%	41.8%	43.0%	39.3%	41.9%	43.5%	55.0%	45.9%
Wider selection of meal choices	38.2%	38.6%	37.5%	31.9%	33.9%	36.9%	42.3%	32.4%
Lower costs for hot school meals	44.6%	45.1%	47.2%	46.4%	45.9%	48.1%	45.0%	39.2%
More ways for parents or pupils to select meals in advance	29.9%	30.7%	27.4%	27.2%	26.9%	26.1%	27.4%	25.7%
More information on school meal nutrition	7.7%	9.9%	9.2%	9.0%	10.7%	11.5%	15.6%	8.1%
More options for special diet types	8.1%	8.9%	8.7%	7.0%	8.0%	9.0%	14.8%	6.8%
Easier parent meal booking	6.5%	7.1%	6.7%	7.2%	6.6%	6.7%	8.7%	4.1%
Increased confidence in allergen management	4.9%	4.6%	4.6%	4.1%	4.5%	4.8%	8.4%	4.1%

Free school meals

Of those eligible for means-tested free school meals:

Eligible and use: 84%
Eligible, but don't use: 16%

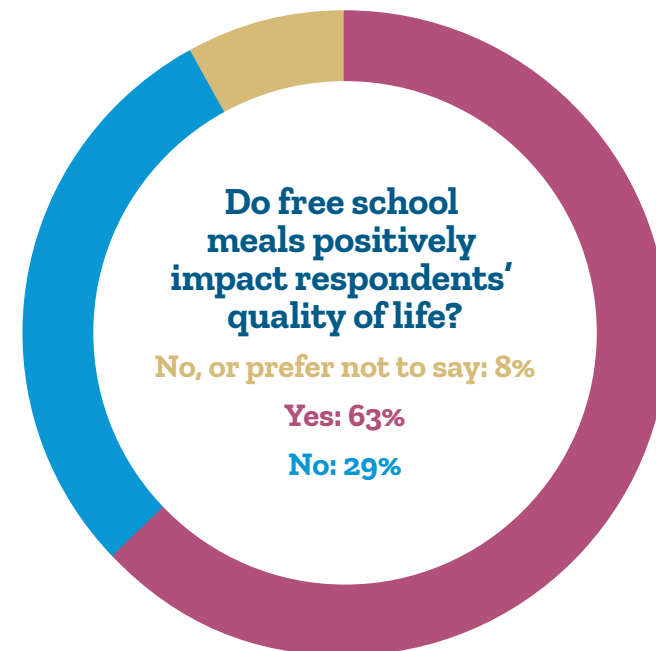## Pleasingly, 65% of respondents

across primary and secondary education in England would **still use school meal provision even if they didn't qualify for free school meals**. Statistically, North East regional secondary are most likely, and South West regional primary are least likely to opt for school meals if they had to pay.
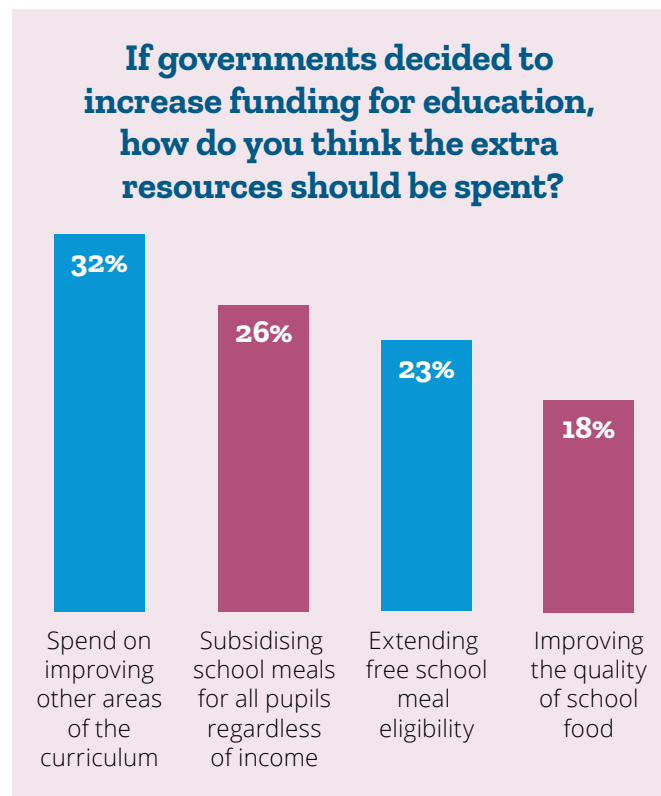
63% of parents

who qualify for free school meals feel that free school meals improve the quality of life for them and/or their children.
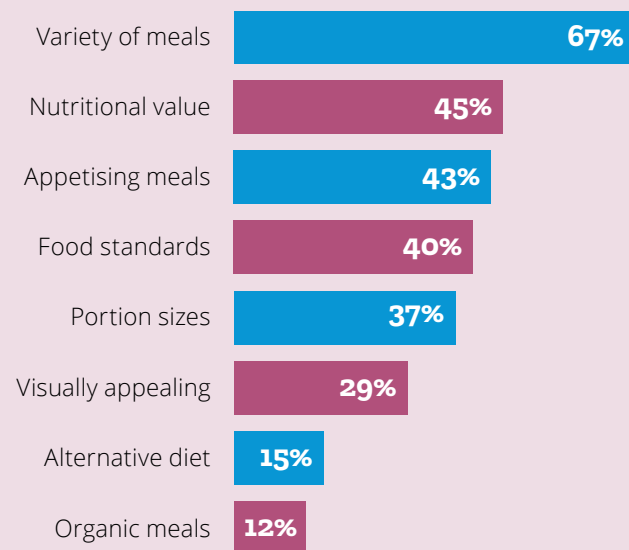
When asked to elaborate on the answer they gave for free school meals and why they don't positively impact on their quality of life, many say that they **need to top up anyway as the allowance doesn't cover the cost of meals**, there is a limited choice available in the free school meals price range and that portion sizes are small.

16% of respondents

don't make use of their free school meals provision. When asked for more information, the reasons given include **limited choices available** due to the time pupils arrive at the canteen, **stigma around claiming free school meal entitlement** and being able to and **wanting to pay** for school meals.

If governments decided to increase funding for education, how do you think the extra resources should be spent?

- 32% — Spend on improving other areas of the curriculum
- 26% — Subsidising school meals for all pupils regardless of income
- 23% — Extending free school meal eligibility
- 18% — Improving the quality of school food

Do free school meals positively impact respondents' quality of life?

No, or prefer not to say: 8%
Yes: 63%
No: 29%

Quality and sustainability

What quality means in a school meal

When assessing the quality of school meals, **variety is a key factor for almost 7 in 10 respondents in England**. After that, a range of other factors come into play such as **nutritional value, being appetising, adherence to food standards, and portion sizes**.

Factor	%
Variety of meals	67%
Nutritional value	45%
Appetising meals	43%
Food standards	40%
Portion sizes	37%
Visually appealing	29%
Alternative diet	15%
Organic meals	12%

Is sustainability and the ethical sourcing of ingredients a factor when choosing school meal provision?

By region within primary schools	North East	North West	Midlands	East Anglia	South West	South East	London	Other
	17917	24079	32810	6975	20487	18539	15607	1000
Yes	14.2%	16.7%	16.2%	15.2%	17.7%	16.8%	20.2%	15.9%
Somewhat	22.0%	23.4%	24.5%	24.1%	25.5%	25.5%	24.3%	18.9%
No	26.9%	23.2%	23.6%	25.1%	23.0%	22.8%	16.5%	22.9%
Need more information	26.0%	25.2%	25.1%	25.2%	24.2%	24.5%	23.1%	24.1%
Not stated	10.9%	11.4%	10.5%	10.3%	9.5%	10.5%	16.0%	18.2%

By region within secondary schools	North East	North West	Midlands	East Anglia	South West	South East	London	Other
	15163	21486	24252	7492	12258	20366	16453	831
Yes	13.7%	16.2%	15.6%	15.0%	17.5%	16.1%	20.0%	13.6%
Somewhat	22.5%	22.8%	24.5%	24.4%	26.2%	25.9%	24.6%	20.5%
No	27.1%	24.3%	24.4%	26.3%	21.8%	23.6%	16.6%	22.9%
Need more information	25.5%	25.1%	23.8%	24.1%	22.9%	23.3%	22.5%	23.7%
Not stated	11.3%	11.6%	11.7%	10.3%	11.6%	11.1%	16.3%	19.4%

16% of respondents surveyed

claim that sustainability and ethical sourcing is definitely a factor when choosing school meal provision.

Impact of sustainability on choice

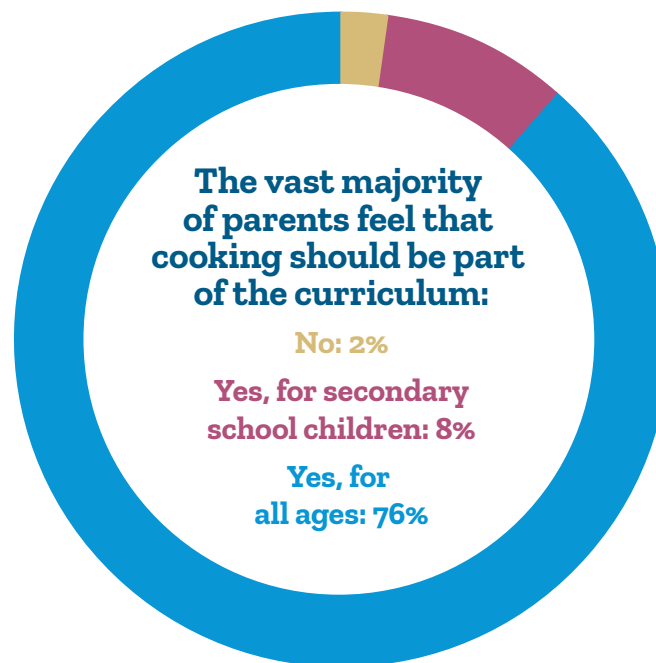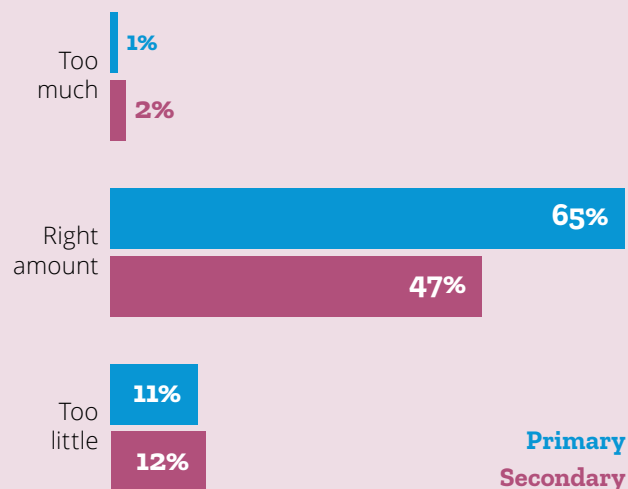| Yes: 16%	Somewhat: 24%	No: 22%	Need more info: 24%

School meal information

The majority of primary school parents surveyed in England feel they receive **the right amount of information about school meals** from their child's school – this drops to just under 50% of secondary school parents feeling the same way.

There are easy ways to increase the information available to parents on school meals using **digital meal management** solutions. This means things like menus, allergy management, ingredients and theme days are **readily available to parents online** and on their mobiles.

Amount of information received about school meals

Too much
- 1%
- 2%

Right amount
- 65%
- 47%

Too little
- 11%
- 12%

Primary
Secondary

The vast majority of parents feel that cooking should be part of the curriculum:

No: 2%

Yes, for secondary school children: 8%

Yes, for all ages: 76%

When we explore the type of information respondents want, the responses are wide-ranging. Menu practicalities dominate with **53% wanting to see the menu this week and 23% wanting to see the menu on the day.**

This is followed by a focus on healthy eating and how it's promoted, nutritional content, and information about upcoming theme days.

Types of information parents would like their schools to provide

The menu this week — 53%

Healthy eating promotion — 25%

Theme days information — 23%

Nutrition in meals — 23%

Details of the menu today — 23%

How healthy eating is fun — 17%

Environmental factors — 15%

Ingredients used — 17%

Education about food — 13%
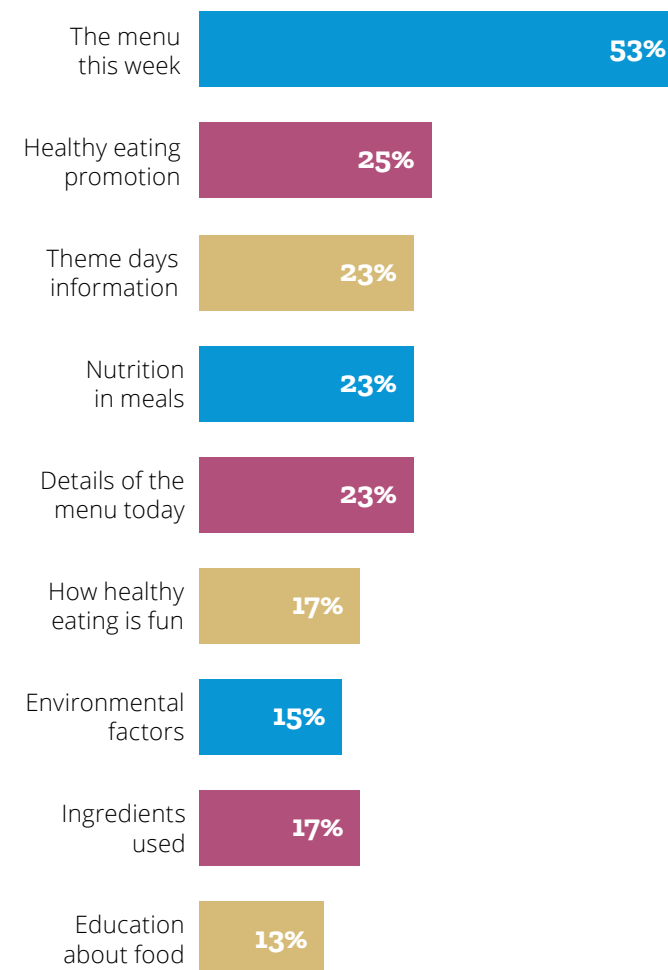
Alternative diets and allergy management

Alternative diets and allergies are at consistent levels across primary **and secondary.**

Parent view

" It is very difficult for my child to understand what is safe for her to eat, gluten free options are very limited and not usually labelled. The advice is to ask a member of the catering team but in a very busy time-limited window for lunch, this is impossible for an 11-year-old to do."

" All allergens are displayed on packaging or available at every till point."

" When you book school meals there is no allergen information. A restaurant could never get away with that. Although this should be the responsibility of the catering company rather than the school."

" School are informed and they let the appropriate people know. Also, newsletters are sent out regularly concerning allergies."

" School is doing a fantastic job in managing special requests and allergens. The menus are clearly marked and children know what each tray colour means."

Just under a quarter of respondents have a child with alternative dietary requirements.

Halal and vegetarian are the highest (amongst the pre-defined needs) with Halal accounting for nearly 1 in 16 pupils. This is highest in the region of London.

76% None

6% Halal

4% Vegetarian

1% Hindu

1% Vegan

1% Pescatarian

0% Kosher

12% Other
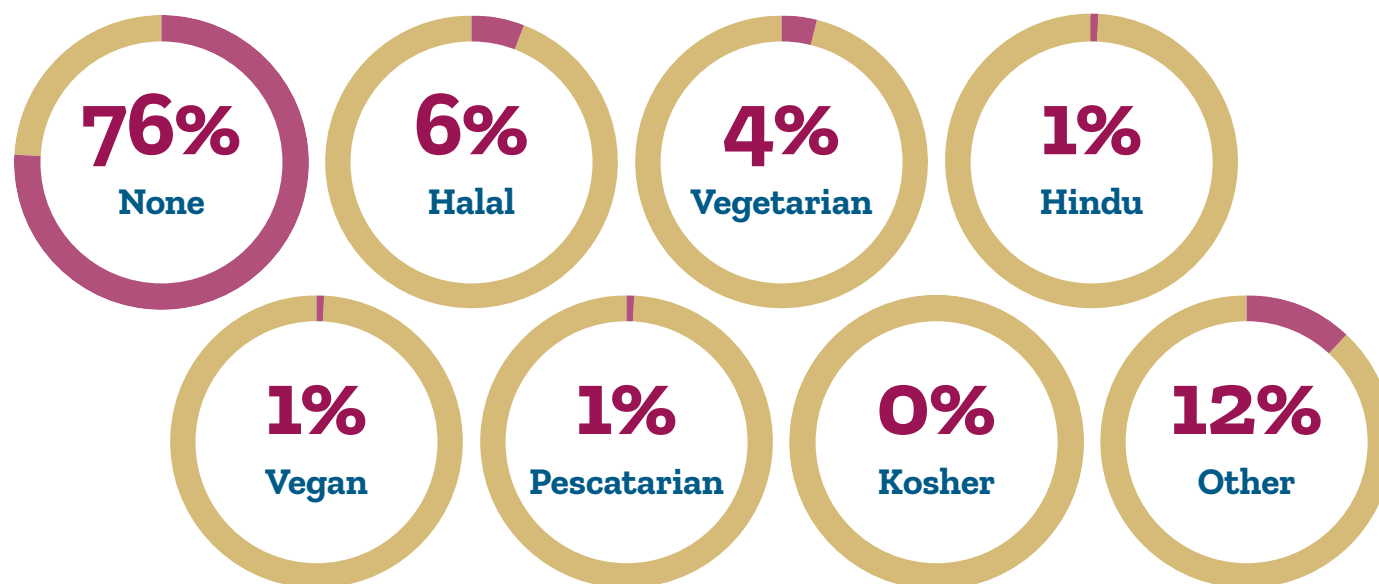
1 in 20 (or 5%)

of parents surveyed have children with established food allergies that need catering for. Again, this number is slightly higher for respondents living in London. Milk and peanut allergies sit at 2% each with gluten at 0.5%.
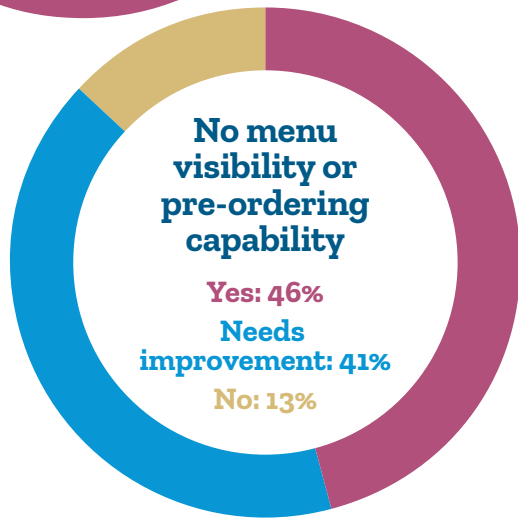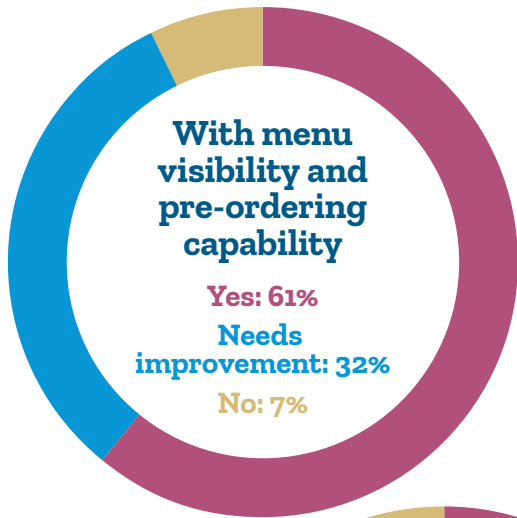
84% No allergies

5% Any established allergies

11% Other

Are allergies and special diets managed appropriately?

With menu visibility and pre-ordering capability

Yes: 61%
Needs improvement: 32%
No: 7%

No menu visibility or pre-ordering capability

Yes: 46%
Needs improvement: 41%
No: 13%

Pre-booking options

give visibility over diet types and appropriate meals, increasing parents' confidence to select a school meal.

How sensitively are allergies managed by schools?

Very: 26%   **Somewhat: 26%**   **Not: 12%**   **Not sure: 34%**

In England, **just over 50%** of parents and carers responsible for a child with an allergy feel that their schools manage allergies sensitively, with **26% saying the school manage them 'very sensitively.'**

Of the same group of parents, 12% feel that allergy management isn't handled with sensitivity at all - **highlighting some room for improvement in this area**.

Bullying due to allergies

Positively, the vast majority of parents with children who have allergies say that their child hasn't experienced bullying because of this.

However, **1 in 10 respondents** say their child has experienced negativity as a result of their allergy, either currently or in the past.

86%
No

4%
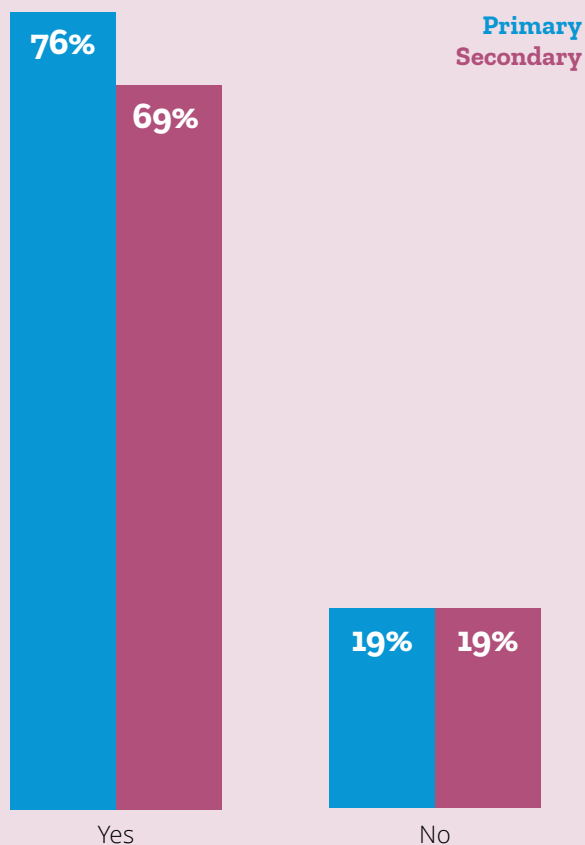Currently

7%
In the past

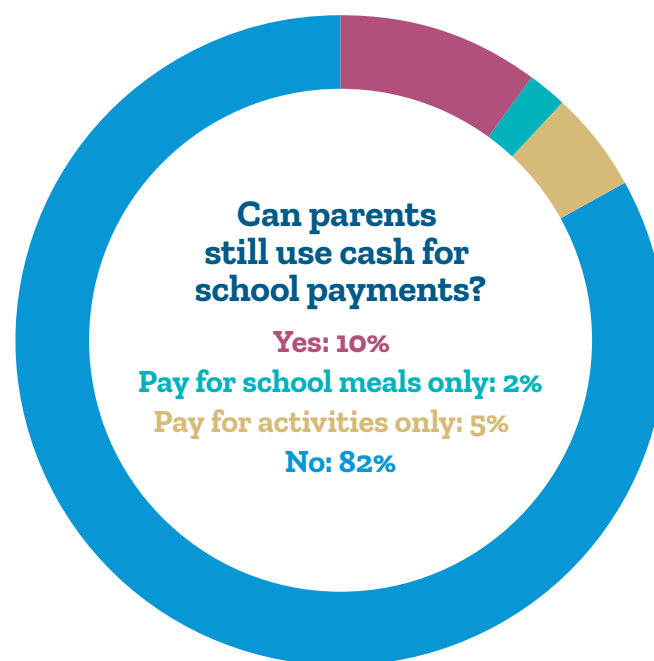**3%**
Prefer not to say

Technology

Ability to pre-select meals

The majority of parents across primary and secondary schools would like to be able to use a system that allows them to pre-select meals ahead of time, view the menu and nutritional content, and see a picture of the food.

Primary
Secondary

76%
69%

19% 19%

Yes
No

Almost 60%

of primary school parents would like the ability to see what their child has eaten in the recent past, with **only 9% already having the ability to do so**.

Can parents still use cash for school payments?

Yes: 10%
Pay for school meals only: 2%
Pay for activities only: 5%
No: 82%

7 in 10 parents in England

say cash payments are a thing of the past. Just 10% of respondents have the option to use cash to pay for all school-related spend. **However, over 69% of these specific respondents prefer to make these payments online.**

" There aren't many schools that are cash-only anymore. We saw in 2020 that 2% of surveyed schools still only accept cash payments, and that number has decreased to 1.6% in 2021.'

Source: ParentPay Whitepaper, 2021

Summary

1. The majority of parents continue to feel that school meals are priced correctly, despite an increase in the cost of living, meaning school caterers are still managing to produce good value-for-money meals.

2. While caterers continue to work tirelessly at improving school meal provision, some topics raised by parents show there is more work to be done in terms of communicating information on key issues that include:

   - allergen management

   - variety of meals on offer

   - healthy and nutritious menu choices

3. For over 50% of parents, it's still an important factor for them to consider the sustainability and ethical sourcing of ingredients when choosing school meal provision.

4. Parents want to be involved in what their children are eating. They have shown interest in having ways of viewing the menu ahead of time and online, information on what their child has eaten, and better visibility of nutritional information.

Recommendations

1. Engage with parents and pupils to provide relevant tools and information that reassures parents, including special diets and allergens.

2. Ensure the availability of good quality, School Food Standard-compliant meals, priced within the value of the Free School Meal Allowance. Food costs and wastage can be reduced using a digital meal management system.

3. Meal pre-ordering solutions greatly improve the chances of pupils receiving their first choice meal, increasing pupil and parent satisfaction and reducing food wastage.

4. Making time for lunch using designated spaces for meals is considered important by parents – aim to move meals out of the classroom post-Covid to help increase meal uptake.

5. Develop regular communications with parents to help promote healthy eating and the availability of nutritious meals within the school meal service.

Our national report – in collaboration with LACA

Are you interested in seeing how the results for England compare to the other countries in the UK? Our national report, made up of 306,354 parent responses, compares opinions on meal quality, allergy and diet management, free school meals and more, across the four countries.

Click here to download your free digital copy to see how England compares.