

# 2023

## **School Meals Report**



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# Who we are



## ParentPay Group

ParentPay Group has long been at the forefront of the EdTech sector. Across the UK and mainland Europe, thousands of schools and millions of parents trust us on payments, communication, meal and information management systems.

Our products use cloud-based technology to streamline processes, improve engagement with parents, deliver cashless payments and simplify school meal management.

The School Meals Report is delivered by the following ParentPay Group subsidiaries:

### ParentPay | [parentpay.com](https://parentpay.com)

Transform how you manage money with this cashless solution for schools in the UK. Whether you're a primary or secondary school, MAT or local authority, you can collect and manage payments for meals, clubs, trips, uniform and more – all in one place.

**Trusted for:** cashless payments, school clubs, parents' evenings, school trips, school shops.

### Cypad | [parentpay.com/cypad](https://parentpay.com/cypad)

Cypad enables kitchens to become fully centralised with digital catering management across single or multiple sites. Meal pre-ordering and comprehensive allergy management let you offer peace of mind to pupils and parents.

**Trusted for:** paperless kitchen management, primary school meal ordering, nutritional analysis, facilities auditing.

### BlueRunner | [bluerunnersolutions.com](https://bluerunnersolutions.com)

BlueRunner Solutions is a trusted provider of meal ordering, food service, hospitality and loyalty software, driving meal uptake and streamlining reporting in school kitchens, canteens, events catering and more across the UK.

**Trusted for:** cashless POS, secondary school meal ordering, bespoke branding, hospitality booking, independent school meal service.

## In partnership with 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, such as:

- o Campaigning and lobbying industry bodies and Government to improve the school food service
- o National and regional events and networking opportunities including the annual LACA Main Event and School Food Show
- o Competitions to promote excellence in school food including School Chef of the Year and Finishing Touches
- o 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 [laca.co.uk](https://laca.co.uk).



**Eating a meal should be a social occasion and [children] should eat away from the classroom.**

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Anonymous surveyed parent



# Introduction

## Approach

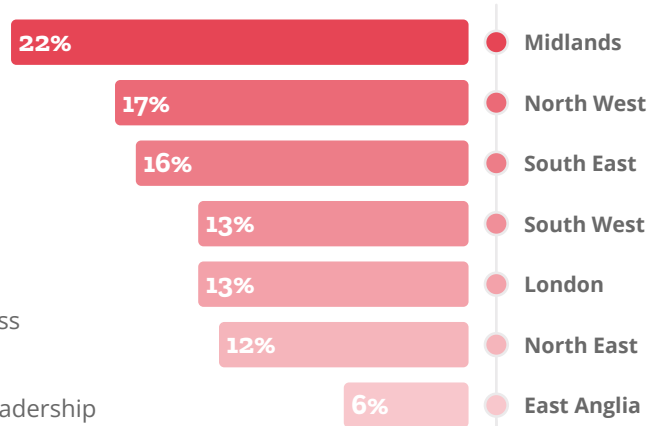
The aim of this research is to understand parents' views on the school meal service and offering available across the UK, to support school caterers in making informed decisions on their catering operation.

This is the third year of this research and ParentPay Group has worked again with LACA to produce this leading study.

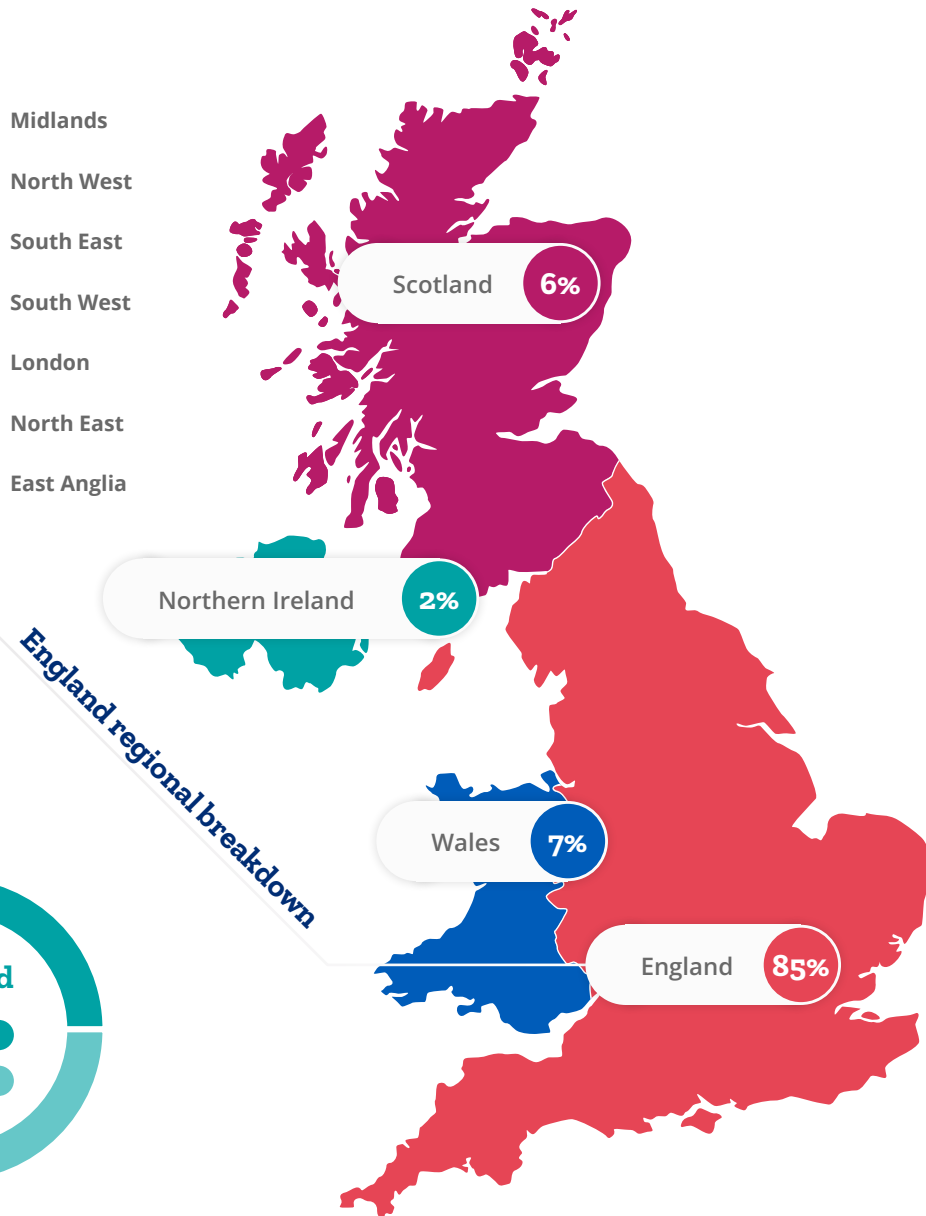
The survey was well received by parents with 246,468 completed interviews. This provides a strong sample size across all UK nations and regionally within England.

This study helps us to understand what caterers and school leadership teams need to do to ensure their schools, clients and families are happy with the service provided. Comparing the results to the previous surveys and other pieces of research will provide an ongoing understanding of the needs of parents/guardians, school leadership and catering teams.

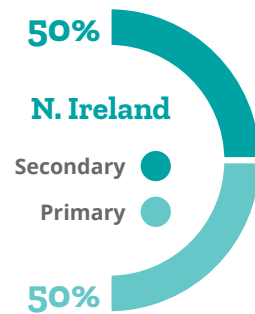
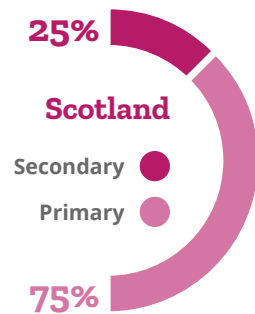
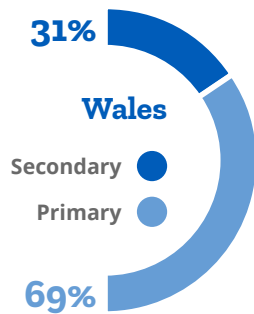
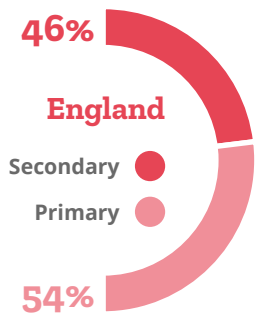
*Note: The majority of questions in the survey included an option for 'Don't know' or 'Unsure' which have been omitted from this report. This is why some of the data points don't reach 100%.*



National split of UK responses:

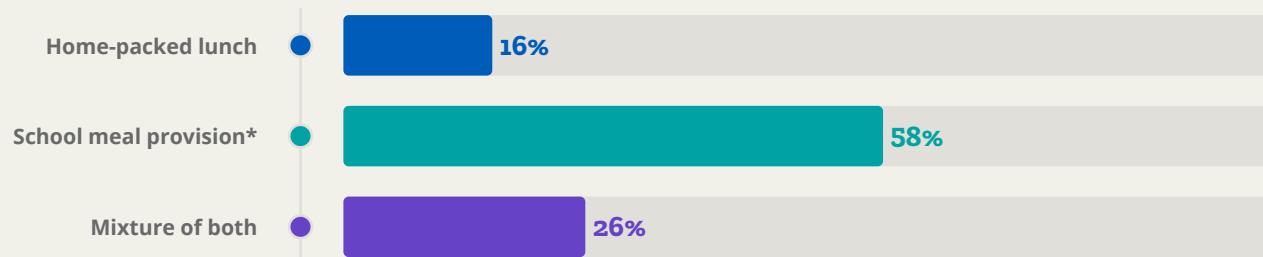


## School age of pupils in...



# Meal provision

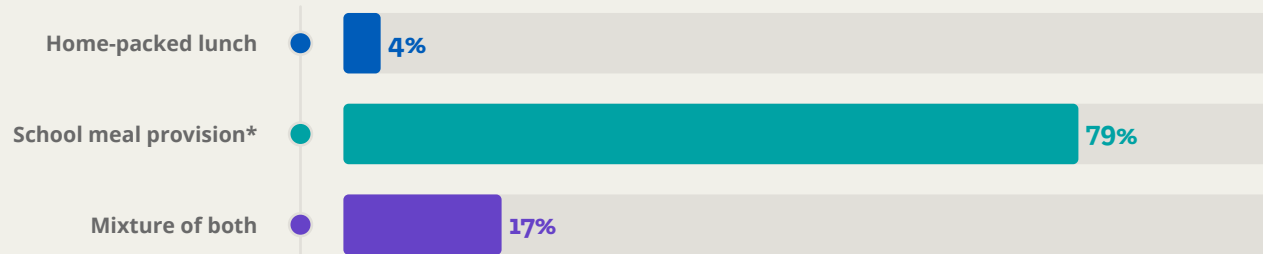
## School meal provision choices



84% of pupils in the UK are having a school meal at least once a week. This is up 1 percentage point (pp) from the 2022 report, but down 4 pp since 2021.

Overall, more than half of UK pupils are having school meals every day, with a quarter swapping between school meals and packed lunches.

## School meal provision choices of respondents eligible for free school meals



The majority (96%) of parents that are entitled to free school meals (FSM), and use them, opt for school meals or a mixture. There is also a slight increase in FSM-eligible respondents choosing school meal provision every day compared to 77% in 2022, suggesting a continued increase in the uptake of free school meals.

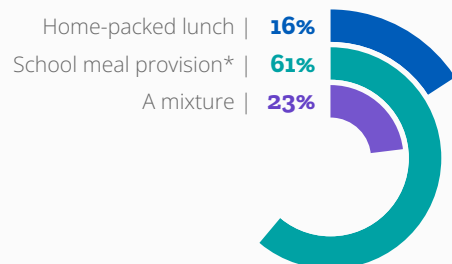
*See page 11 for more information on free school meals.*

*\*School meal provision more than 4 days a week*

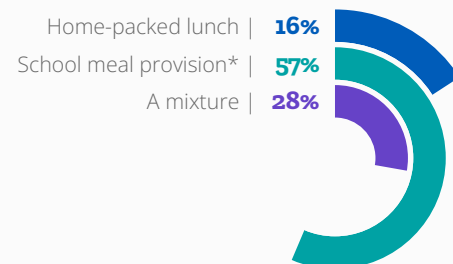
## School meal provision by primary and secondary

### England

#### Primary

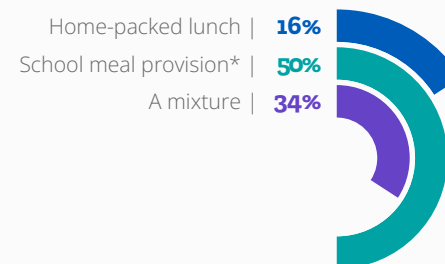


#### Secondary

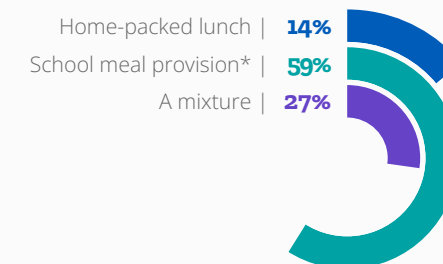


### Wales

#### Primary

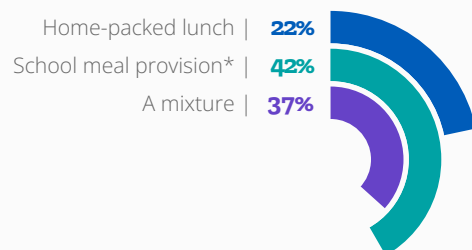


#### Secondary

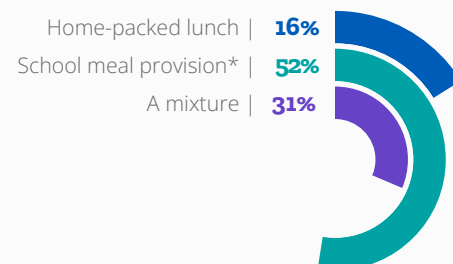


### Northern Ireland

#### Primary

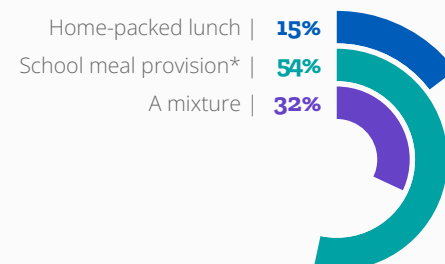


#### Secondary

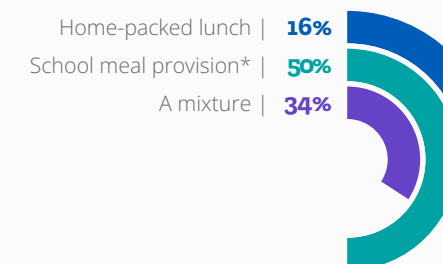


### Scotland

#### Primary



#### Secondary



## School meal provision across regions in England

	North East	North West	Midlands	East Anglia	South West	South East	London
Home-packed lunch	14%	14%	17%	18%	19%	17%	12%
School meal provision*	65%	65%	56%	53%	53%	54%	64%
A mixture	20%	21%	27%	29%	28%	30%	24%

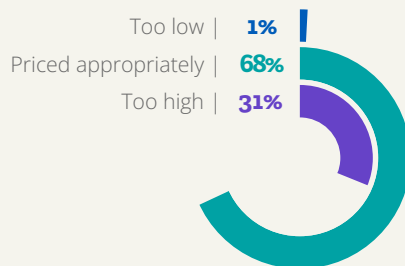
Overall, parents in England are more likely to be using school meal provision every day for their children than using a mixture of school meals and a home-packed lunch.

\*School meal provision at least 4 days a week

## Price rating of hot school meals

Promisingly, the majority of parents surveyed feel that school meals are priced appropriately. Of the UK nations, respondents in Scotland were the most likely to say the pricing of meals is accurate.

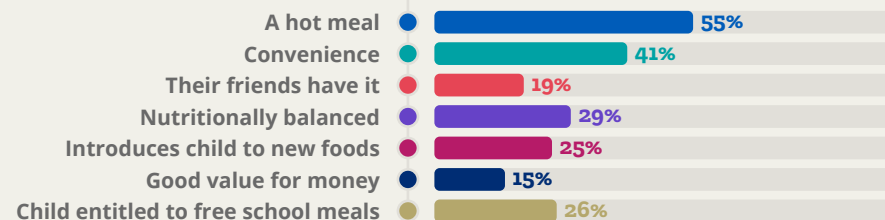
The proportion of parents who feel meal prices are too high has increased by 3 pp since 2022. This is to be expected with the cost of living crisis, and is reflected in the LACA Cost of Living March 2023 report ([laca.co.uk/laca-research-reports](https://laca.co.uk/laca-research-reports)), which examines how caterers are managing the impact of rising inflation.



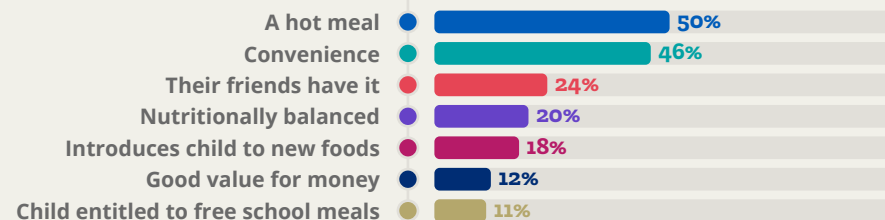
	Total	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
<b>Total</b>	<b>125,195</b>	<b>108,516</b>	<b>7,654</b>	<b>7,473</b>	<b>1,552</b>
<b>Too low</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>1%</b>
<b>Priced appropriately</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>65%</b>
<b>Too high</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>34%</b>

## Reasons for choosing school meals

### Opting for school meals every day



### Opting for mixture of school meals and packed lunches



These results indicate that for both groups of respondents, getting a hot meal and the convenience school meals offer are the most frequent reasons for choosing school meal provision.

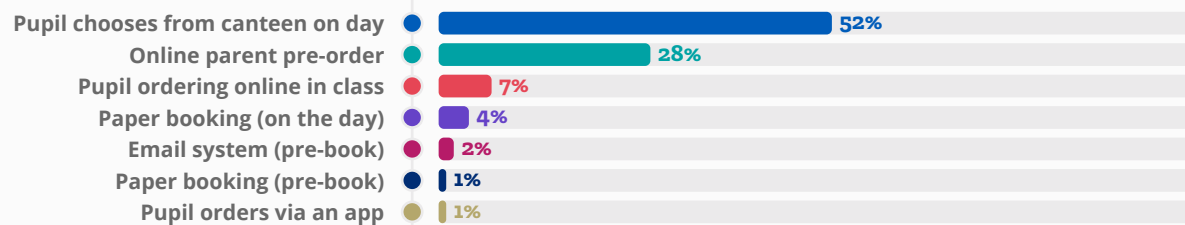
### LACA commentary

“It is reassuring to see that the view of parents and the top reason for choosing school meals daily or a mix during the week is “having a hot meal”, echoing LACA’s core objective - to ensure that all pupils and students should be able to access, and benefit from, a freshly prepared, nutritious and balanced hot meal at lunchtime. It is also good to see that, from these responses, the social aspect of sharing a meal with friends is also a key factor.

In the current economic climate, it is a positive that the significant majority feel that school meals are appropriately priced. It is, perhaps, important to not forget that the meal price needs to cover not just food but also labour to prepare, cook and serve but also other operating costs.”



### Method of choosing school meals



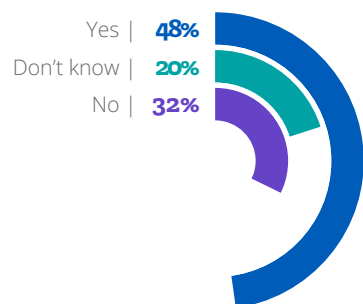
Meal choice is predominantly done on the day, although over a quarter of parents pre-order online.

48,000 respondents said they would prefer a different way of choosing school meals to their current method.

64% want meal pre-ordering to be available to them or their secondary school-aged children, with 61% of these stating a preference for digital or online pre-order options. This is a 10 percentage point (pp) increase compared to the 2022 report.

### Impact the method of choice has on the pupil getting the meal they want

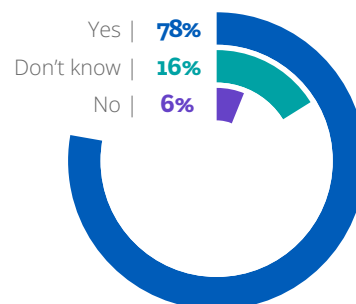
#### All respondents



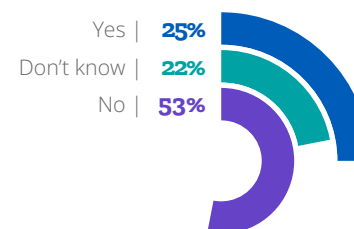
Across all parents and carers who responded, nearly half said their children get the meals they want, but a significant proportion – one third – said they don't.

Nearly 1 in 5 don't know whether the meal received matched the pre-ordered meal or the pupil's choice on the day, depending on the method of ordering.

#### Respondents who can or do pre-order meals



#### Respondents who can't or don't pre-order meals



When splitting this by respondents who can pre-order meals and those who can't, the results show that among parents and older students who can pre-order school meals, nearly 80% of pupils get the meal they choose. This is an increase of 16 pp from last year's report.

Supply chain issues and increases in the cost of staple ingredients mean school caterers are having to change menus at the last minute, and reduce the variety available on menus to ensure they can cook enough plates to meet demand. By utilising digital meal ordering solutions, parents are able to engage more with their children's school meals, plan ahead, and feel confident that their child is receiving the meal they have chosen, increasing school meal uptake.

Having oversight of meals ordered each day means school kitchens can cook to order, reducing food wastage and saving money on ingredients. Using digital menus also means it's easier to make menu changes according to the ingredients available when ordering stock, and the change can be easily reported to the school and parents via the digital platform. This can help reduce the stress of supply chain issues and speed up the school meal service.

# How to increase meal uptake

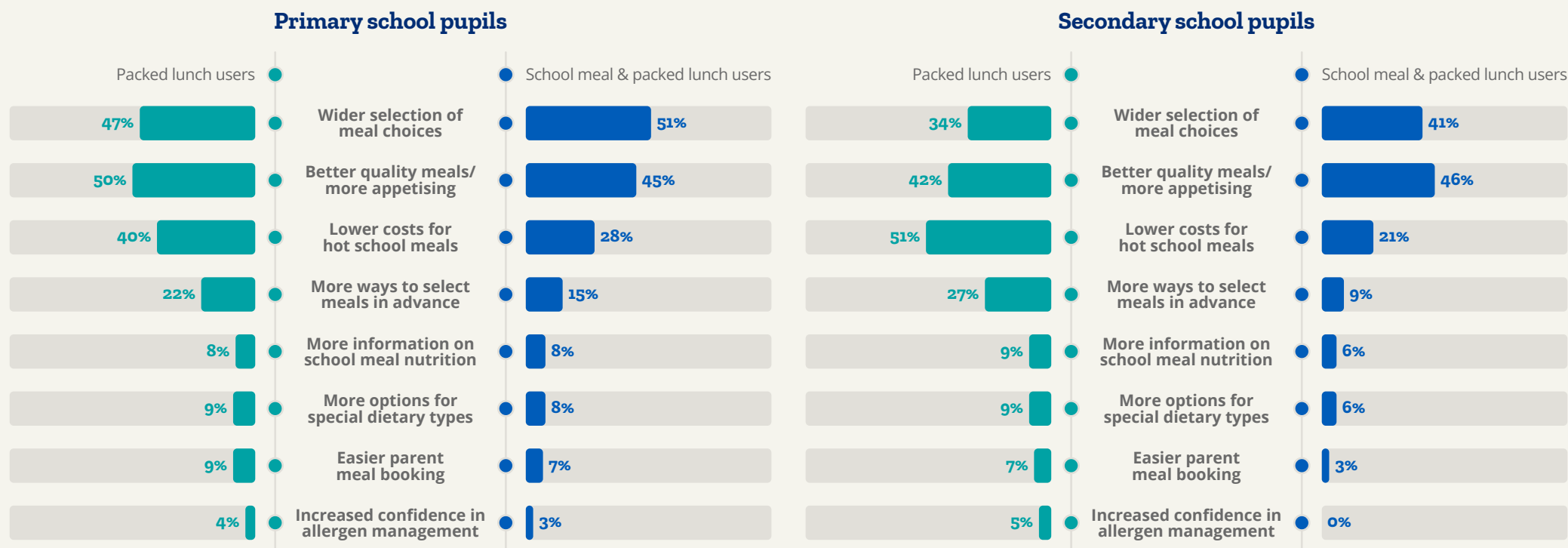
The top three factors that would encourage increased school meal uptake are:

1. A wider selection of meals
2. Meals being better quality or more appetising
3. A lower cost per meal

## Year-on-year comparison

A wide variety of quality meals continues to be the top factor for changing from packed lunches, and has resulted in this year's increased school meal uptake compared to 2021 and 2022. School caterers and local authorities can use digital meal management solutions to offer a wider choice of meals while minimising waste and spend on excess stock, by allowing parents and/or pupils to pre-order and cooking to demand.

## Which of these would increase the frequency of parents choosing school meal provision?



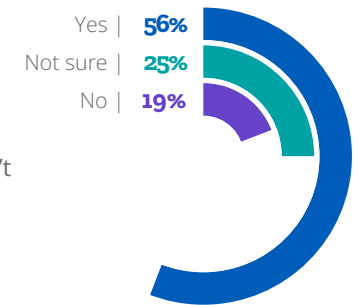
### Does the dining environment play a part in school meal uptake?

When asked if the dining environment plays a part in deciding if pupils would take a school meal, half of respondents stated that the dining environment does have an impact on school meal take-up, down by 7 percentage points (pp) compared to the 2022 report.

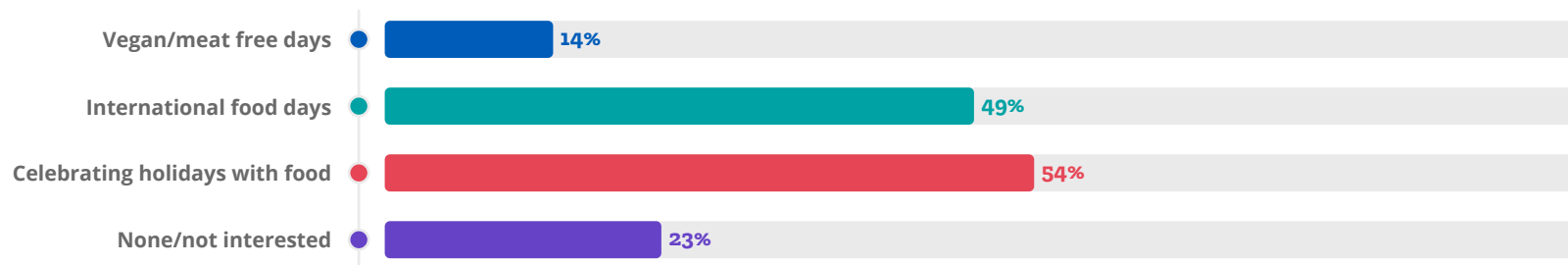


### Willingness and/or ability to pay for a school breakfast provision

Of those that would like to see a breakfast option, but don't currently have one available in their schools, just over half would be willing to pay for it. This presents an additional revenue opportunity for caterers and schools, as well as the learning benefits a healthy breakfast gives to pupils.



### The impact of themed menus on school meal uptake



Nearly 8 in 10 said that more themed meals would be a factor in them choosing more school meal provision. Holiday celebration themes like Eid, Chinese New Year and Christmas were the most popular, at 54% of respondents.

### The parent view...

“Eating in designated spaces adds so much more structure to the day.”

“They like a packed lunch in spring/summer as they can eat it outside on the grass.”

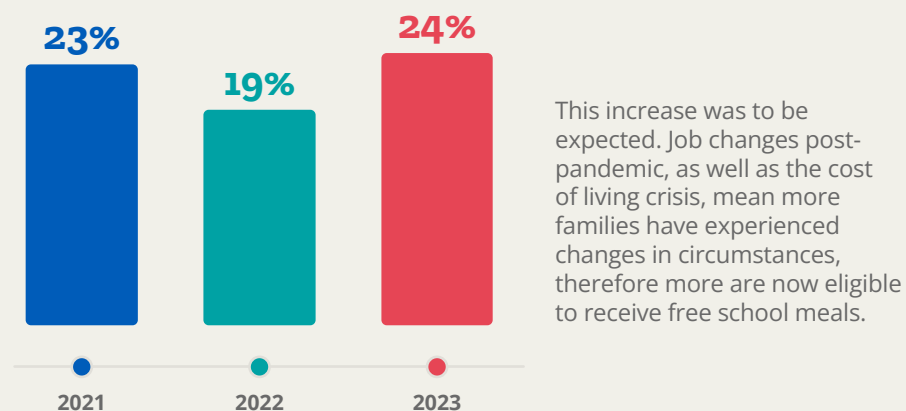
“The convenience of school meals and having warm lunches is more important.”

“Eating a meal should be a social occasion and they should eat away from the classroom.”

# Free school meals (FSM)

## Year-on-year comparison

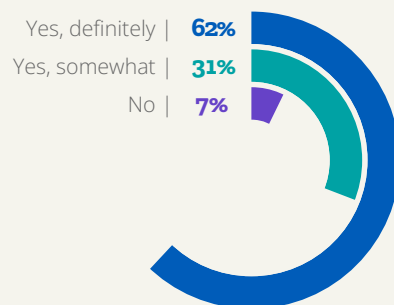
### Percentage of total respondents who are eligible for FSM:



## The impact of free school meals on respondents' quality of life

The majority of parents who qualify for free school meals feel that FSM improves quality of life for them and/or their children.

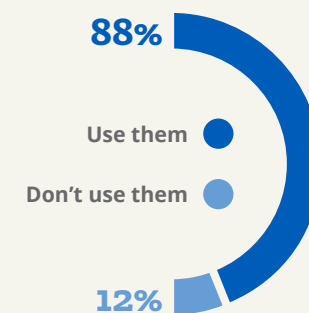
Reasons given for FSM not improving quality of life included small portion sizes meaning pupils are hungry after and 'topping up' by buying more, limited choices available, poor nutritional value of meals served and the free school meal spend not covering the price of a hot school meal.



## Of those eligible for means-tested free school meals...

When the 12% of respondents who don't make use of their FSM provision were asked to give more detail, the reasons given included children not liking the meals on offer, the time it takes to queue for a hot school meal at lunchtime, not wanting the school to be aware of individuals receiving benefits, a gap in understanding of how to apply for the process, and some who feel they are able to manage to pay for their child's school meals.

We also found that nearly two thirds (64%) would still use school meal provision, regardless of whether they qualified for FSM.



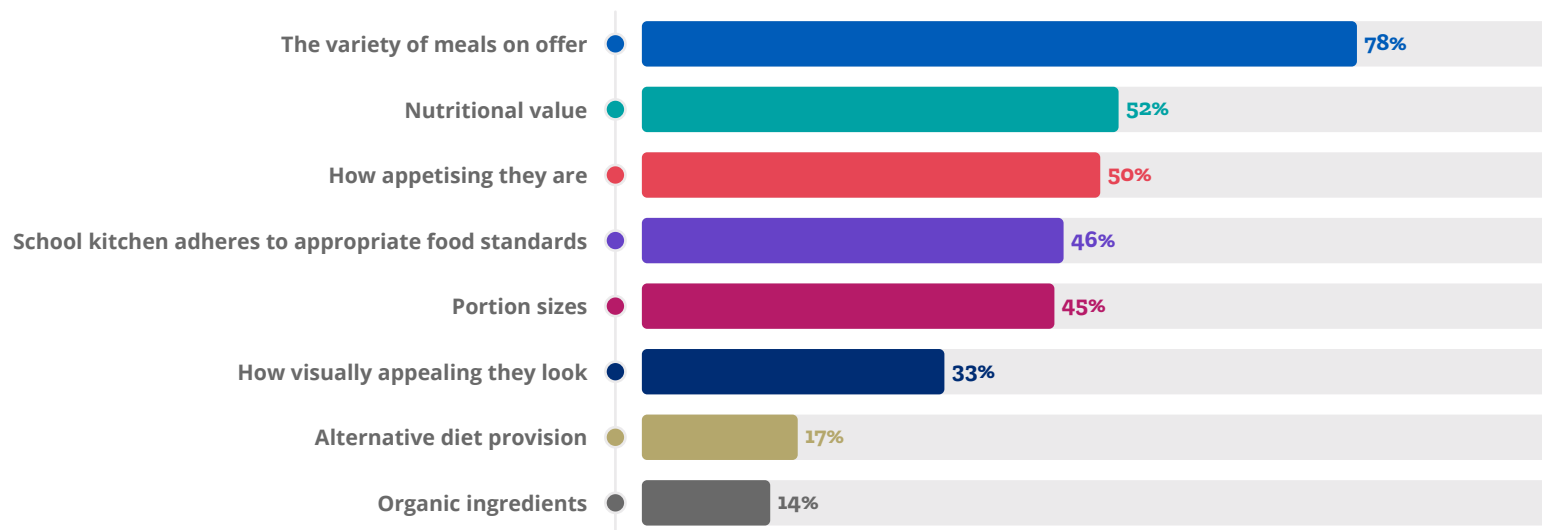
## If governments decided to increase education funding, how do you think the extra resources should be spent?

Respondents were asked to rank their answers in order of preference:

- 1 Extending free school meal eligibility
- 2 Improving the quality of school food
- 3 Providing free school meals for all pupils regardless of income
- 4 Spend on improving other areas of the curriculum

# Quality and sustainability

## How do parents assess the quality of school meals?



When assessing the quality of school meals, variety is a key factor for almost 8 in 10 parents.

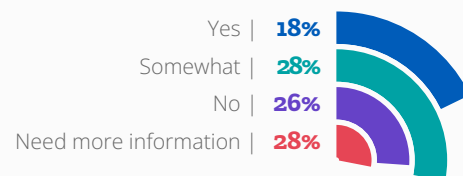
After that, a range of other factors come into play, with nutritional value, being appetising, adherence to food standards, and portion sizes being notable factors for around half of respondents.

## The impact of sustainability on choice

Nearly 1 in 5 of surveyed parents responded that sustainability and ethical sourcing of food is definitely a factor when choosing school meal provision.

28% were open to the idea but would need more information.

There is no change year-on-year for the impact of sustainability on choice.

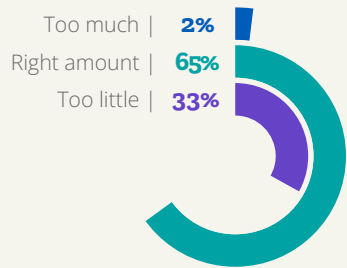


### National breakdown:

	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Yes	19%	17%	18%	14%
Somewhat	28%	28%	26%	25%
No	26%	27%	28%	33%
Need more information	28%	28%	30%	29%

# School meal information

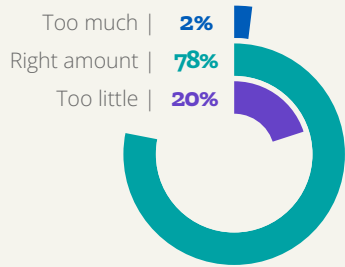
## How much information do parents get from their school about school meals?



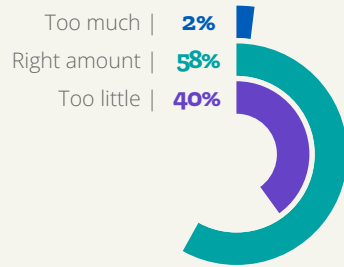
Almost two thirds of respondents said they get the right amount of information about school meals from their child's school. However, one in three feel they don't receive enough information.

There has been a 1 pp increase since 2022 in parents who feel they get enough information about school meals from schools.

### With meal pre-ordering options



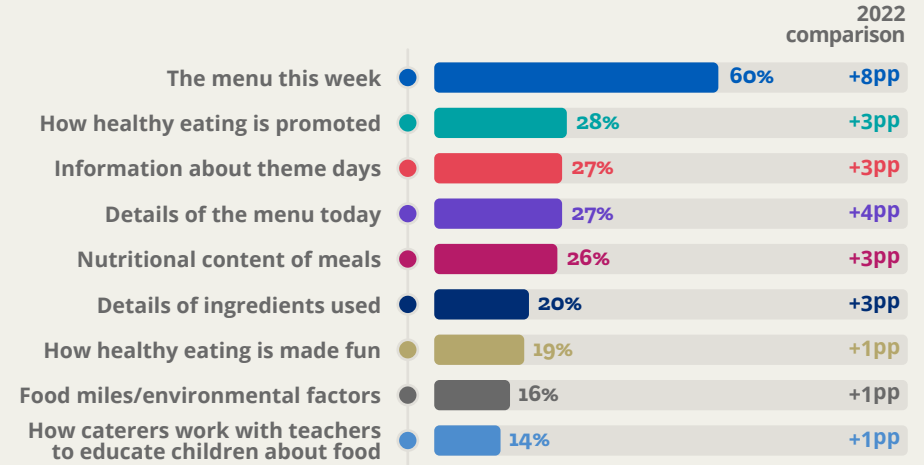
### Without meal pre-ordering options



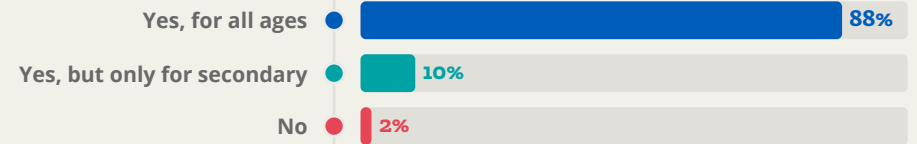
78% of respondents who have the ability to see the menu ahead of time and pre-order their child's school meals say they get the right amount of information from their school.

This drops to just 58% for those parents who don't have this functionality available to them, with 40% reporting that they receive too little information.

## Information parents would like their schools to provide



## Should cooking be on the curriculum?



The vast majority of parents feel that cooking should be part of the curriculum for children of all ages, with a further 10% saying it should be for secondary children only.

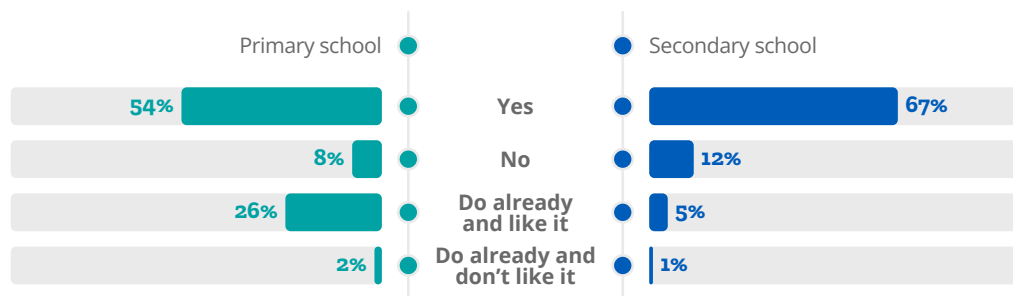
# Technology

## Would parents like to use school meal-related software?

Parents were asked if they would like to be able to use a system that allowed them or their child to:

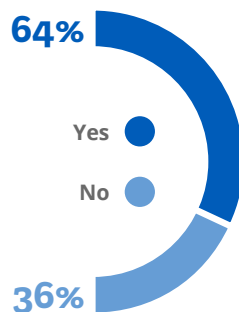
- Pre-select meals ahead of time
- View the menu and nutritional content
- See a picture of the food

The majority of parents across primary and secondary schools said they like the idea of being able to do this. Only 5% of secondary school parents currently have the option to do this and like it, compared to 67% who would like to be able to.

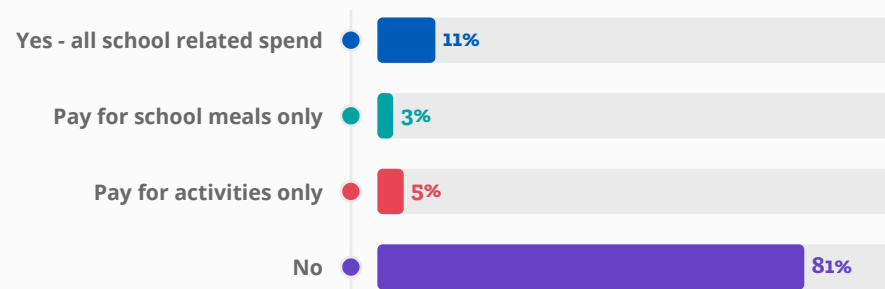


## Would you like the ability to see what school meals your child has eaten recently?

64% of primary school parents surveyed also said that they would like to have the ability to see what school meals their child has eaten in the recent past.



## Can surveyed parents still use cash to pay for school-related spend?



The majority of schools continue to use cashless payment methods for school meals and activities.

For those parents who still have the option to use cash to pay for school-related spend, nearly 70% would choose to use cashless payment methods.

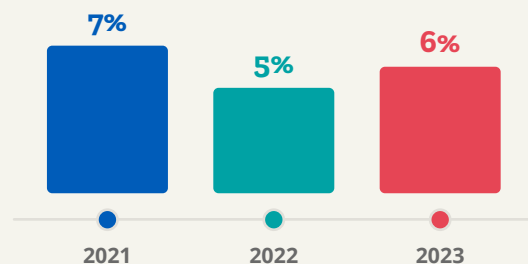
## Parents at schools that allow cash payments were also asked their preferred method of paying for school-related costs

	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Online payments only	69%	64%	61%	62%
Cash payments only	2%	3%	3%	3%
A mixture	28%	33%	36%	34%

# Alternative diet and allergy management

## % of pupils with established food allergies

### Year-on-year comparison

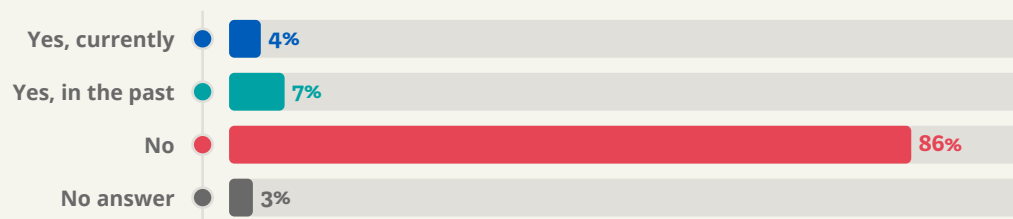


6% of respondents have children with established food allergies.

Milk and peanut allergies are the most common at 2% each, with eggs and cereals with gluten third and fourth at 1%.

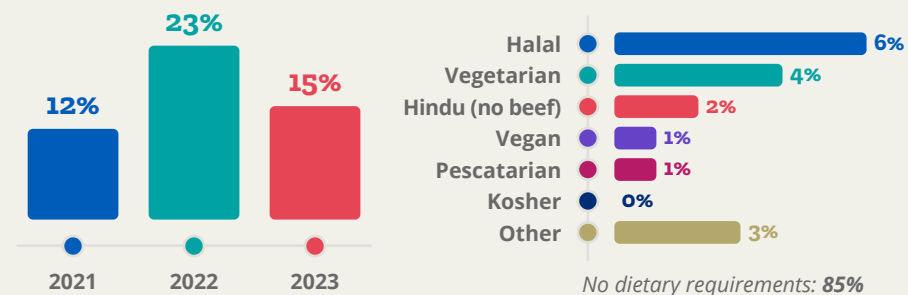
	Total	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
<b>Total</b>	<b>222,263</b>	<b>189,627</b>	<b>14,805</b>	<b>14,467</b>	<b>3,364</b>
Milk	2%	2%	2%	2%	3%
Peanuts	2%	2%	1%	2%	2%
Eggs	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Cereals with gluten	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%

## Have pupils experienced bullying as a result of their allergy?



## % of pupils with alternative dietary requirements

### Year-on-year comparison



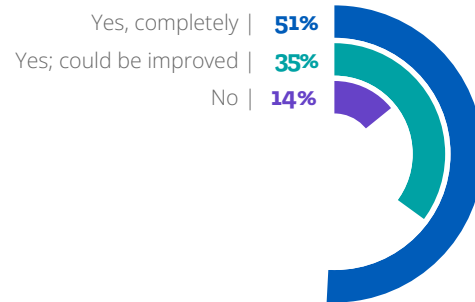
15% of parents surveyed have children with alternative dietary needs, with Halal being the most common amongst the pre-defined needs, accounting for 6% of school children.

	Total	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
<b>Total</b>	<b>223,340</b>	<b>190,567</b>	<b>14,866</b>	<b>14,529</b>	<b>3,378</b>
Halal	6%	7%	4%	4%	1%
Vegetarian	4%	4%	4%	4%	2%
Hindu (no beef)	2%	2%	0%	1%	0%
Vegan	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%
Pescatarian	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%
Kosher	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%



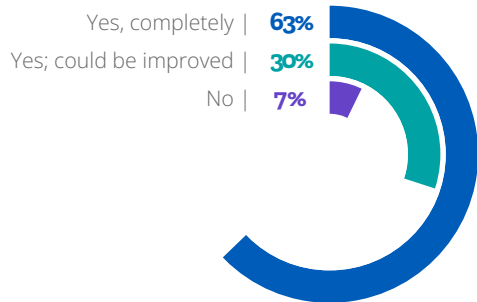
## Do you feel allergies are managed appropriately by your school?

The majority of parents who have children with allergies feel that their schools manage allergies well, with more than half reporting complete confidence in them. This figure has increased by 3 pp since 2022, demonstrating that conscientious school caterers are inspiring trust in allergy management.

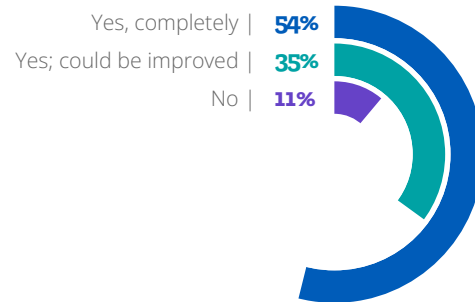


When the above is split by having or not having the ability to pre-order meals (therefore seeing the menu, and depending on the method, the ingredients), 63% of caregivers who can pre-order meals said they feel allergies are managed completely appropriately. This drops to 54% for those without meal pre-ordering options.

### Respondents with menu visibility and pre-ordering capability



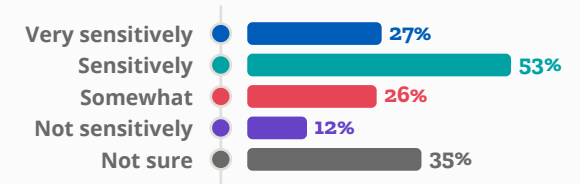
### Respondents without menu visibility and pre-ordering capability



Pre-booking options give visibility over diet types and appropriate meals according to the pupils requirements, increasing parents' confidence in choosing school meal provision.

## How sensitively are allergies managed by schools?

Of the same group of parents, just over half feel that allergy management is handled with some sensitivity, with 27% feeling it's managed very sensitively. This is a 2pp increase on the 2022 research.



## The parent view...

"Dietary team are great and sent the menu to be checked - never had an issue with her being given anything she shouldn't have."

"All meal details can be accessed online allowing me to check which meals are suitable. School always sends emails to inform parents of any changes."

"My daughter has to vigilantly check herself if there will be any ingredient she may be allergic to in the meal. The ingredients should be more visible at the start of the queue."

"I am always sent the relevant paperwork to check and complete each year. They have a no-nuts policy in school. School keeps my child's health care plan in school."

"The school doesn't always notify me if they are planning any food-related activities in school where I might need to provide an alternative."

# Summary and recommendations

## Summary

1

School meal uptake is high across the UK, with 84% of pupils having a school meal at least once a week and 58% having school meals every day. School meals are valued by most parents for providing a hot meal for their children and for being convenient.

2

The top three factors that would encourage increased school meal uptake are a wider selection of meals, meals being better quality or more appetising, and a lower cost per meal. Parents consider the variety of meals on offer, nutritional value and how appetising the meals look to be key indicators of school meal quality.

3

64% of parents want meal pre-ordering to be available for their secondary school-aged children. Only 5% of secondary school parents currently have the option to pre-order meals, compared to 67% who would like to be able to.

4

88% of parents who are eligible for free school meals use them with 62% stating that they improved their quality of life. 31% of respondents said they felt that FSM doesn't improve their quality of life due to small portion sizes, poor nutritional value and the free school meal spend not covering the cost of a hot school meal.

## Recommendations

1

Introduce digital meal pre-ordering to help children get the school meal they want, and help parents to feel they get the right amount of information about their child's school meals. Additional benefits would be ensuring allergies are managed appropriately and increasing meal uptake.

2

Use a digital kitchen management solution alongside pre-orders to cook food to order. This will reduce waste and save money on ingredients, therefore reducing the cost per plate and enabling lower costs for parents.

3

Communicate information about school meals to parents, especially the weekly menu and nutritional/allergy information, to help increase confidence, boost engagement and improve their perception of school meals.

4

Use online/digital media to promote weekly menus to demonstrate how appetising school meals can be, and work with students, schools and parent groups to develop menus that offer high-quality nutritious meals which make school meals the go-to option.

5

Share information with parents about how school meals meet the School Food Standards, and how the nutritional value helps to improve lower-income families' quality of life.



**With 246,468 completed interviews, this study helps us to understand what schools, clients and families need to do to ensure their clients and families are happy with the service provided.**

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ParentPay, Cypad, BlueRunner and LACA



## **Interested in comparing the results across the individual nations in the UK?**

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National report from ParentPay, Cypad, BlueRunner and LACA