2022 School Meals Report

From ParentPay, Cypad and LACA

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Contents

Who we are

ParentPay

ParentPay Group is the UK's largest education technology business, and 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 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 for 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.cypad.com

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.
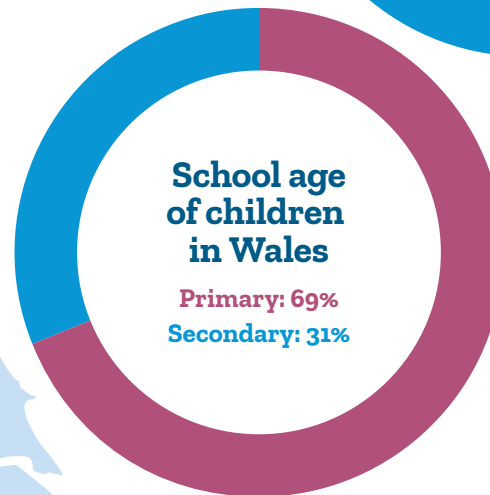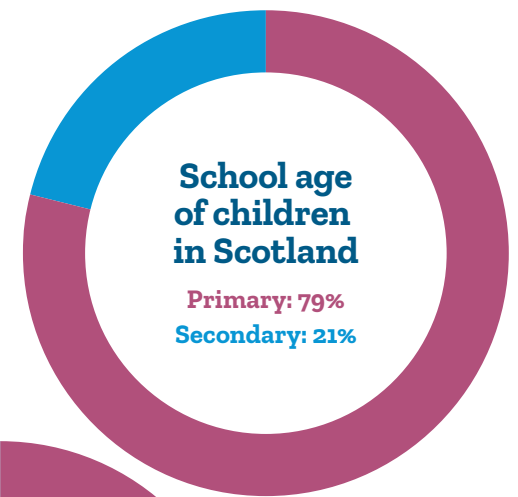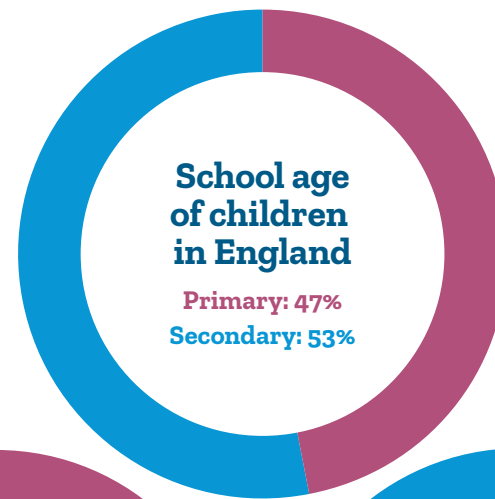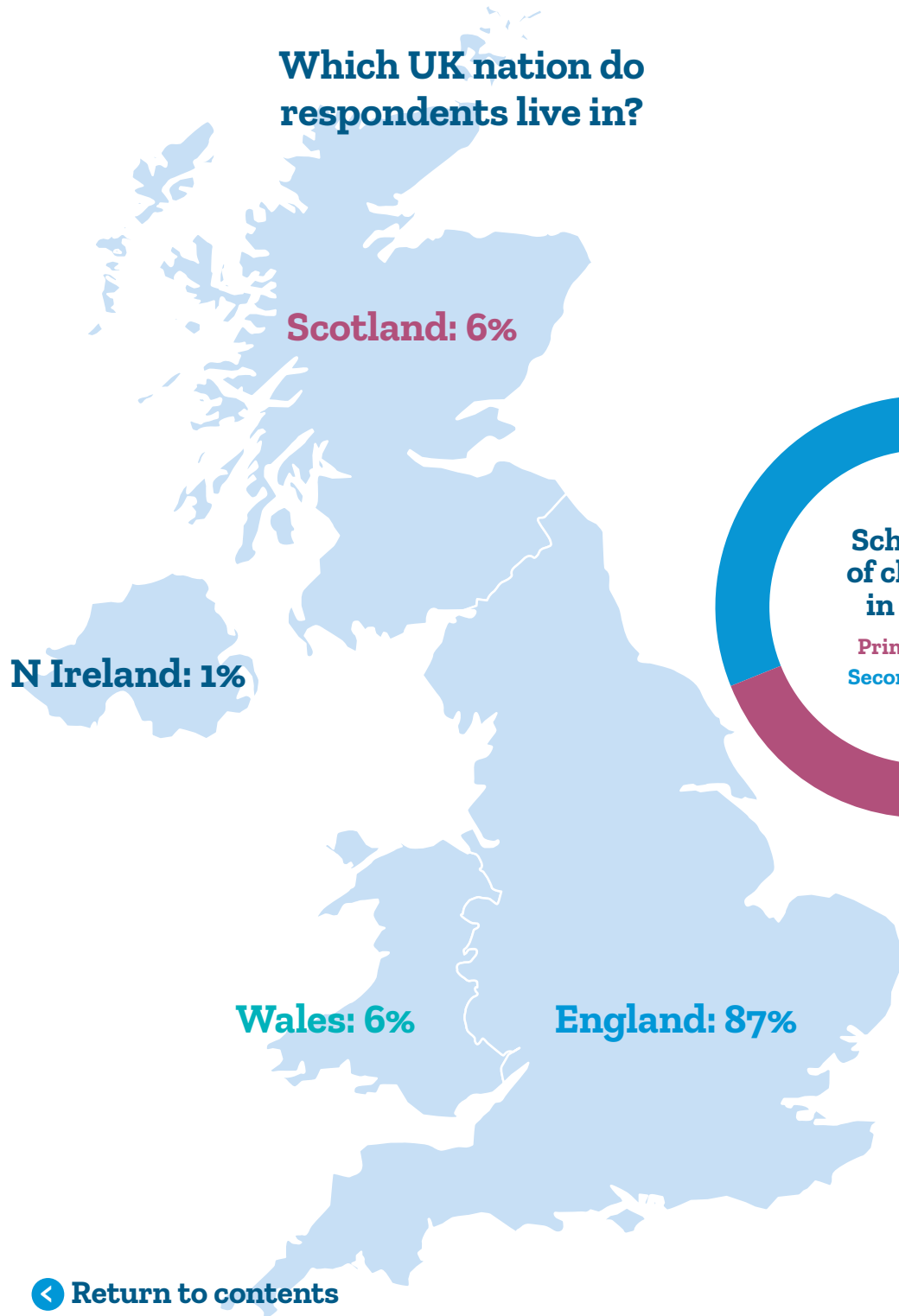
www.laca.co.uk

Introduction

The aim of this research is to understand the parental view of 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 and totalled 306,354 respondents, providing an extremely robust overall sample size across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as within the regions of England.

As an organisation in its 31st year, LACA has long been recognised as an association representing and supporting school catering organisations and teams across the country, with 80% of school catering services being delivered by its members. Assist FM have also contributed to the report and gave their full support for the responses from parents across Scotland.

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. Comparing the results to the previous survey and other pieces of research will provide an ongoing understanding of the needs of parents/guardians, school leadership and catering teams.

Which UK nation do respondents live in?

Scotland: 6%

N Ireland: 1%

Wales: 6%

England: 87%

School age of children in England
Primary: 47%
Secondary: 53%

School age of children in Scotland
Primary: 79%
Secondary: 21%

School age of children in Wales
Primary: 69%
Secondary: 31%

School age of children in N. Ireland
Primary: 50%
Secondary: 50%

Regional breakdown of respondents in England

Region	Percentage
Midlands	22%
North West	17%
South East	15%
North East	13%
South West	12%
London	12%
East Anglia	6%
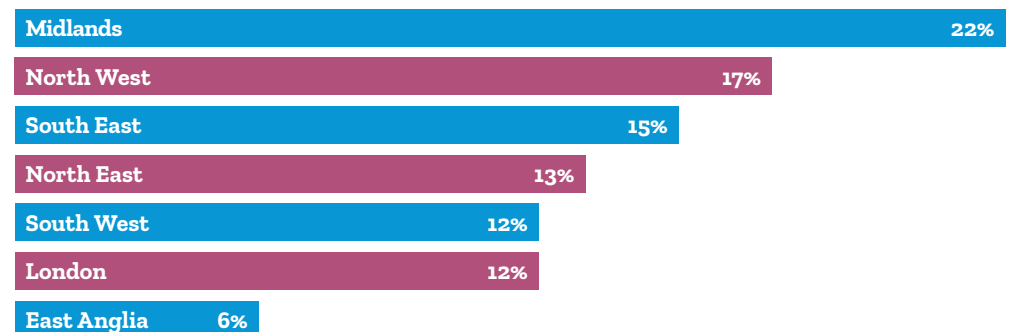
Meal provision

83% of pupils

are having a school meal at least once a week. Overall, a half of children are having school meals everyday, with a third of those switching between school meals and packed lunches.
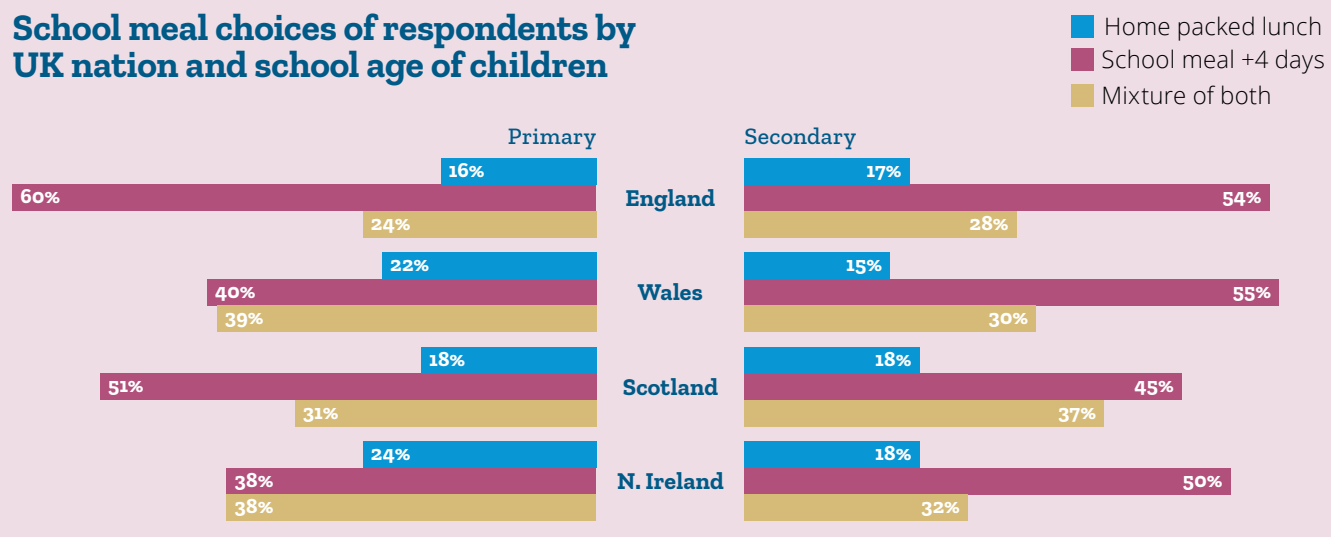
School meal provision chosen

Home packed lunch: 17%
School meal: 56%
Mixture: 27%
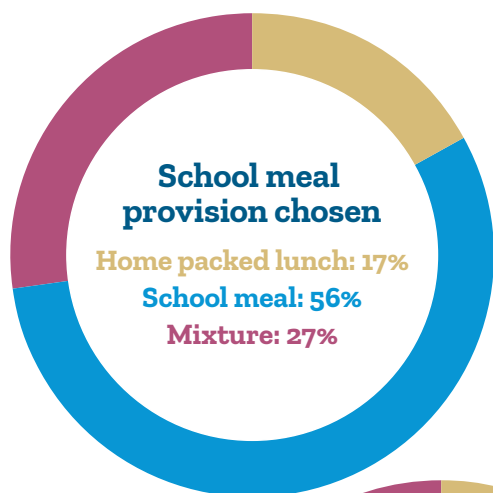
See **page 7** for more information about free school meals.

School meal chosen when eligible for free school meals

Home packed lunch: 4%
School meal: 77%
Mixture: 19%

The majority of parents

who are entitled to FSM and use them opt for school meals or a mixture. Still, **23% of free school meal parents are opting for a mixture** of packed lunches and school meals or packed lunch only.

School meal choices of respondents by UK nation and school age of children

Legend:
- Home packed lunch
- School meal +4 days
- Mixture of both

	Primary	Secondary
England	16% / 60% / 24%	17% / 54% / 28%
Wales	22% / 40% / 39%	15% / 55% / 30%
Scotland	18% / 51% / 31%	18% / 45% / 37%
N. Ireland	24% / 38% / 38%	18% / 50% / 32%

Regional breakdown of school meal selection across England

	North East	North West	Midlands	East Anglia	South West	South East	London
Home packed lunch	15%	15%	18%	19%	19%	19%	13%
School meal (+4 pw)	64%	64%	55%	50%	51%	51%	62%
A mixture of both	21%	21%	28%	31%	30%	30%	25%

Reasons for choosing school meals

Reason	%
Hot meal	47%
Convenience	45%
Friends have it	24%
Nutritional	20%
Try new foods	17%
Good value	11%
Free school meal	10%
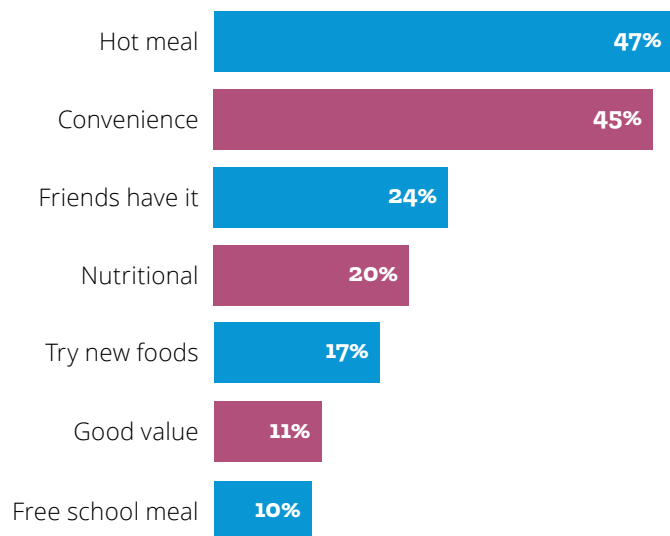
Those who are mixing school meals and packed lunches

say the top-2 reasons for choosing school meals are to **get a hot meal and the convenience it provides**.
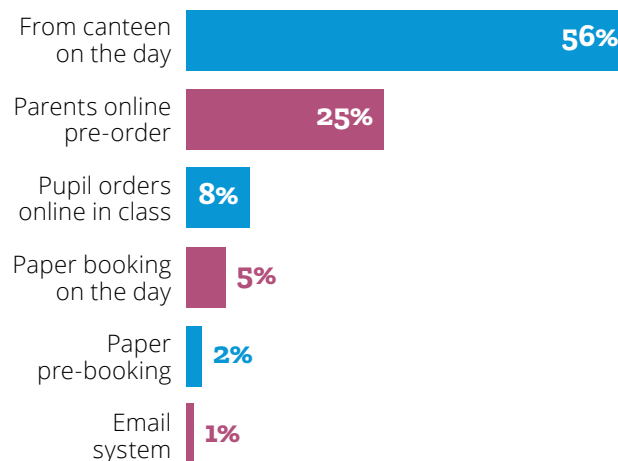
Meal choice is predominantly done on the day, although a quarter of parents pre-order in advance.

Of the 85,000 respondents

who would prefer a different method of choosing school meals to their existing method, **63% of them want to be able to pre-order meals in advance.**

Method of choosing school meals

Method	%
From canteen on the day	56%
Parents online pre-order	25%
Pupil orders online in class	8%
Paper booking on the day	5%
Paper pre-booking	2%
Email system	1%

Impact that the method of choice has on the pupil getting the meal they want or choose:

Can't pre-order meals

Yes: 46%
No: 34%
Don't know: 20%

Can pre-order meals

Yes: 62%
No: 21%
Don't know: 17%
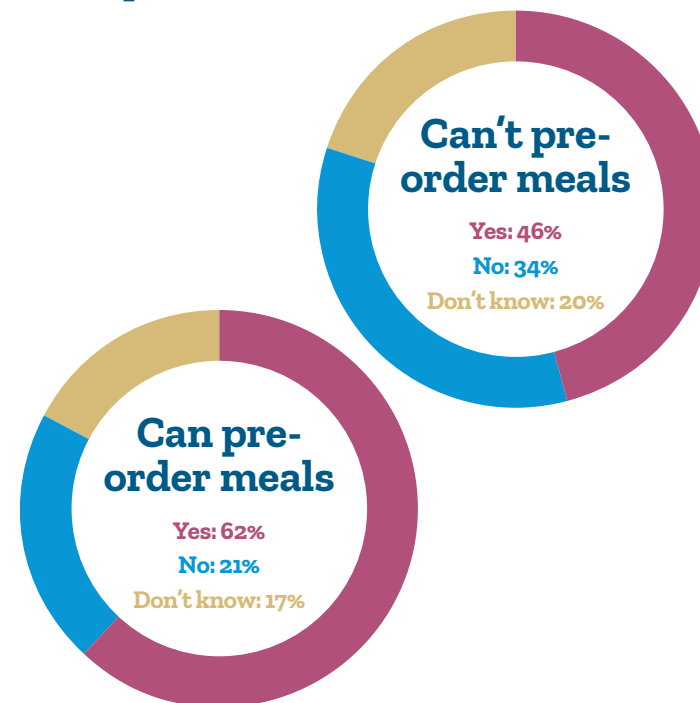
Digital meal pre-selection

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

Price rating of hot school meals

|	Total	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Total respondents	153,535	136,886	7,868	7,218	1,563
Too low	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Priced appropriately	69%	69%	64%	79%	67%
Too high	28%	28%	33%	17%	31%

Promisingly, **69% of parents still feel that school meals are priced correctly**, while **28% think the price is too high**. There has been a **drop of 11% of those feel that meals are priced correctly compared to the 2021 report.**

How to increase meal uptake

> 66 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 to her does make her request a packed lunch." **Surveyed Parent**

> 66 Yes; children need to socialise in a dining hall." **Surveyed Parent**

> 66 Eating in the canteen is a huge factor for my child as she is highly sensitive to noise and smells and is easily put off eating by this." **Surveyed Parent**
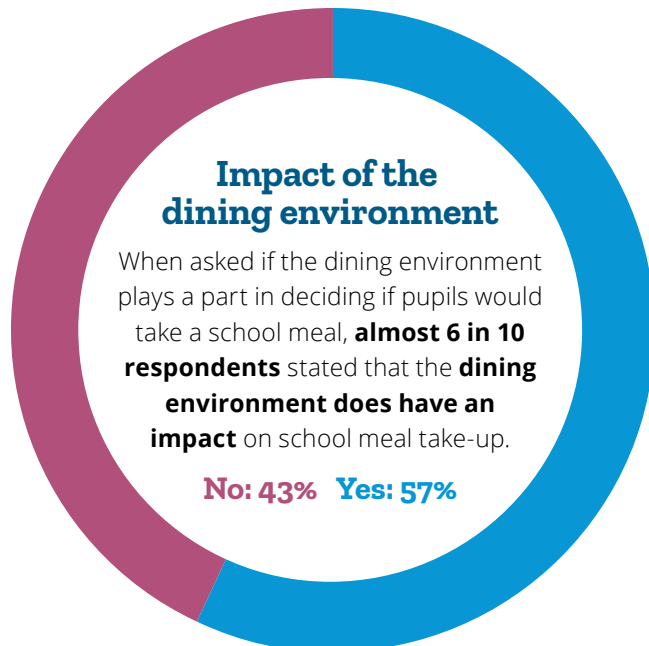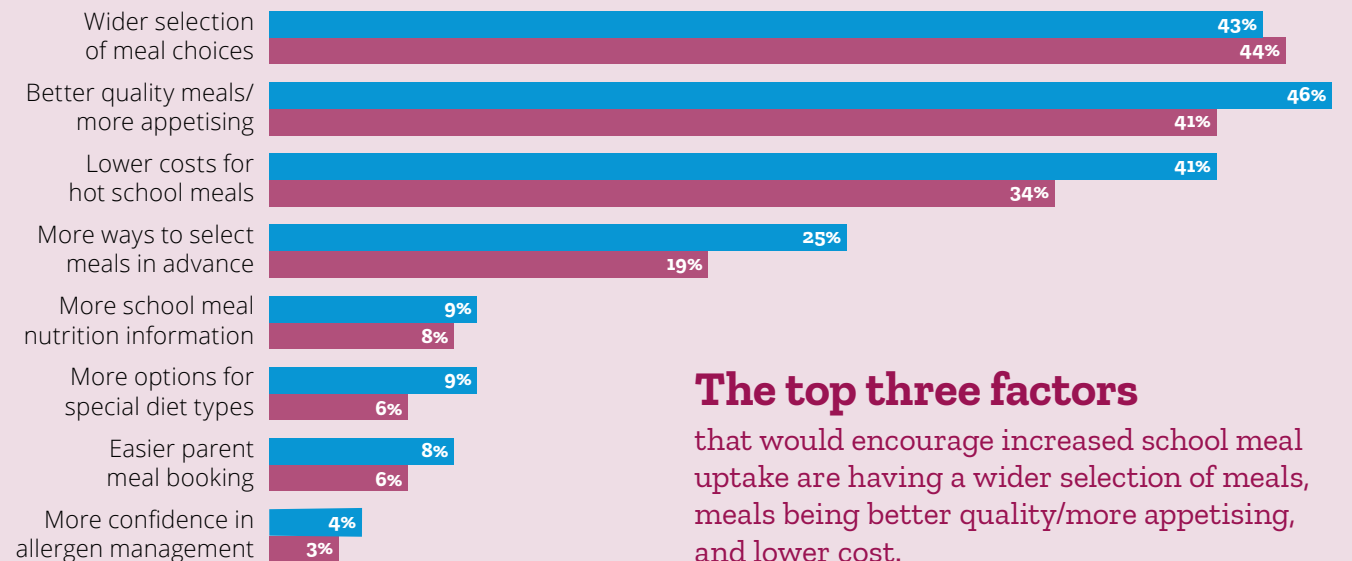
Themed meals

are of interest to nearly 8 in 10 surveyed parents as being a factor for 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.

70% of parents surveyed

would be willing to pay for a breakfast option if it was provided by their schools, presenting an additional opportunity for caterers and schools, as well as the learning benefits a healthy breakfast gives to pupils.

Impact of the dining environment

When asked if the dining environment plays a part in deciding if pupils would take a school meal, **almost 6 in 10 respondents** stated that the **dining environment does have an impact** on school meal take-up.

No: 43% Yes: 57%

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

Legend:
- Packed lunch users
- School meal & packed lunch users

Factor	Packed lunch users	School meal & packed lunch users
Wider selection of meal choices	43%	44%
Better quality meals/more appetising	46%	41%
Lower costs for hot school meals	41%	34%
More ways to select meals in advance	25%	19%
More school meal nutrition information	9%	8%
More options for special diet types	9%	6%
Easier parent meal booking	8%	6%
More confidence in allergen management	4%	3%

The top three factors

that would encourage increased school meal uptake are having a wider selection of meals, meals being better quality/more appetising, and lower cost.

2021 comparison:

A wide variety of quality meals remains the top factor for changing from packed lunches in 2021 and 2022, for both **primary school, at 50% of parents surveyed**, and **secondary school, at 39%**. 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.

Free school meals

Of those eligible for means-tested free school meals:

Eligible and use: 81%
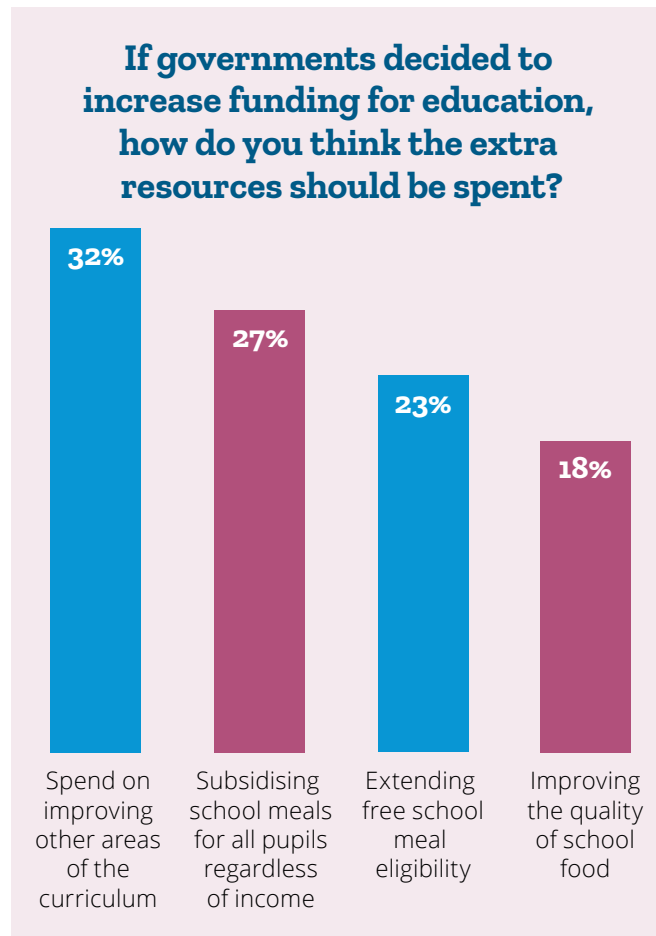**Eligible, but don't use: 19%**

3% of respondents

When asked to give more detail on why they **don't make use of their free school meal provision**, a number stated that this is due to the **stigma attached** to free school meals, or that there is **little healthy choice** within the meals provided, so they would rather provide packed lunches.

## 64% of those eligible for free school meals

would use school meal provision even if they didn't qualify for free 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
- **27%** — Subsidising school meals for all pupils regardless of income
- **23%** — Extending free school meal eligibility
- **18%** — Improving the quality of school food

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.

29% of the respondents stated free school meals don't improve quality of life. Many say that their free school meal allowance doesn't cover a full meal, so they must top up anyway. Some also say they are paying extra for top up meals or snacks due to a combination of limited variety of meals and portion sizes, leaving pupils hungry.

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

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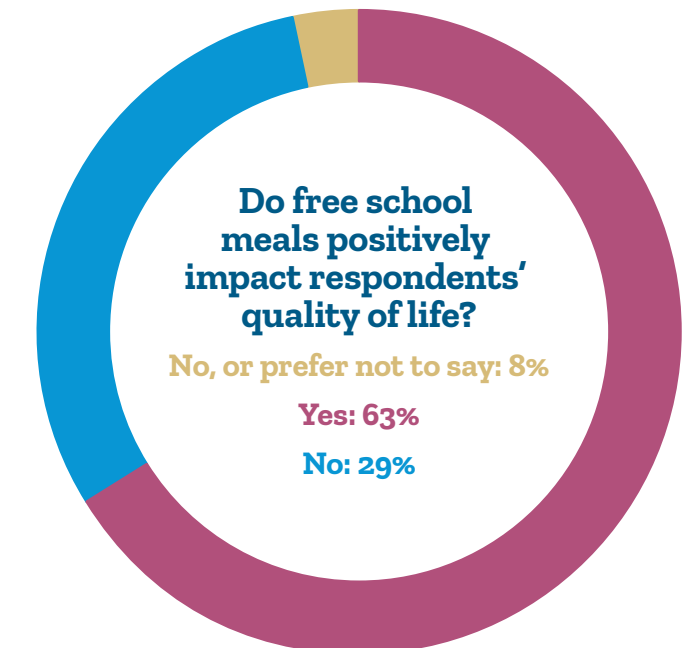
Quality and sustainability

Nearly 1 in 5 parents

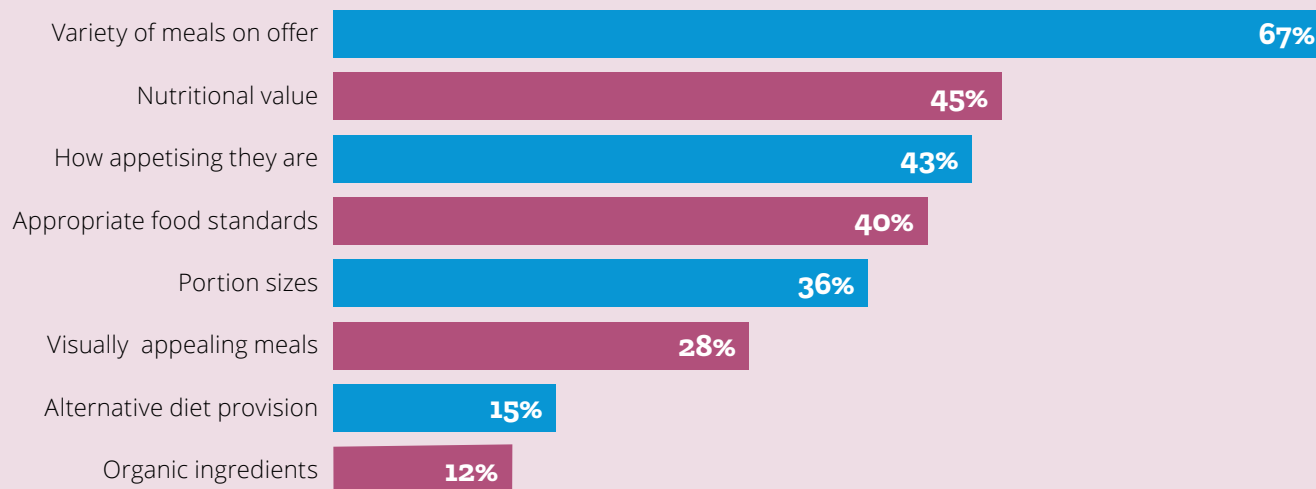surveyed claim that sustainability and ethical sourcing is definitely a factor when choosing school meal provision.

2021 comparison

30% of respondents in 2021 said sustainability was definitely a factor in choice, down to 19% in 2022.

Impact of sustainability on choice

Yes: 19%

Somewhat: 27%

No: 26%

Need more info: 28%
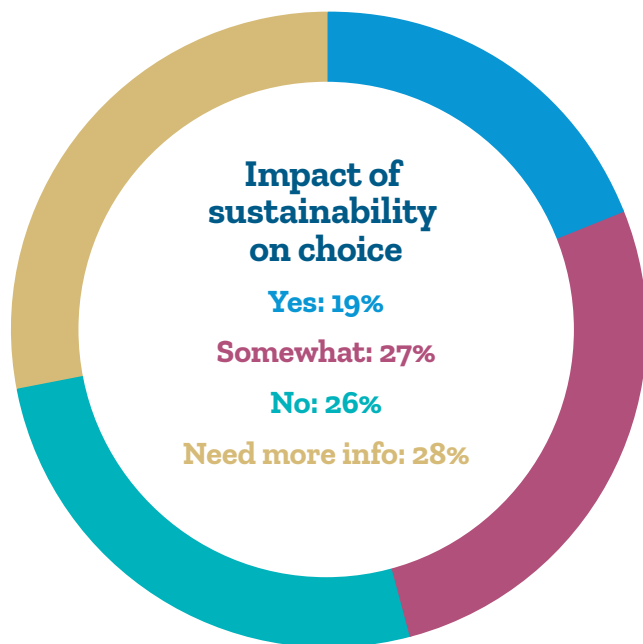
What quality means in a school meal

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

Factor	%
Variety of meals on offer	67%
Nutritional value	45%
How appetising they are	43%
Appropriate food standards	40%
Portion sizes	36%
Visually appealing meals	28%
Alternative diet provision	15%
Organic ingredients	12%

Sustainability a factor in meal choices by regions of England

	North East	North West	Midlands	East Anglia	South West	South East	London
Yes	16%	19%	18%	17%	20%	19%	24%
Somewhat	25%	26%	28%	27%	29%	29%	29%
No	30%	27%	27%	29%	25%	26%	20%
Need more info	29%	28%	28%	27%	26%	27%	27%

School meal information

Two-thirds of respondents

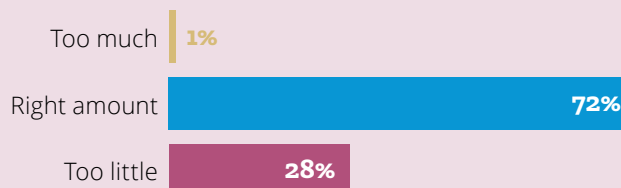feel they get the right amount of information about school meals. However, just over 1 in 3 feel there should be more.

Amount of information

- Too much **2%**
- Right amount **64%**
- Too little **34%**

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

No: 2%

Yes, for secondary school children: 9%
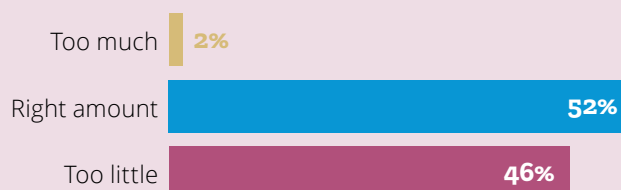
Yes, for all ages: 89%
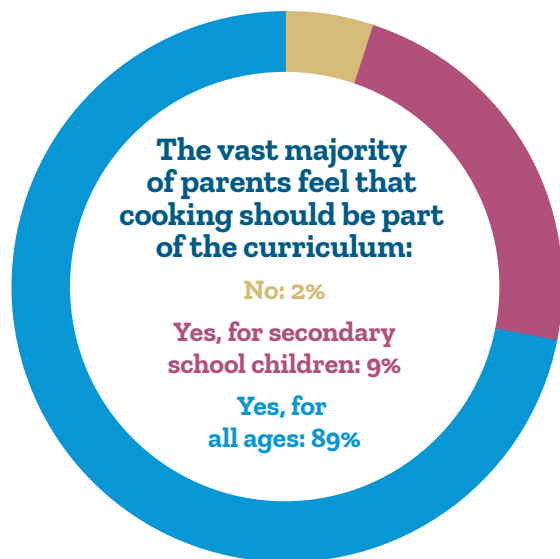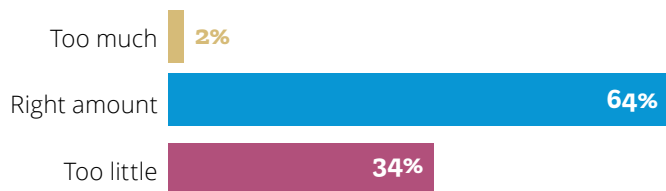
72% of respondents

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. In comparison, nearly 50% of those who can't pre-order say they receive too little information.
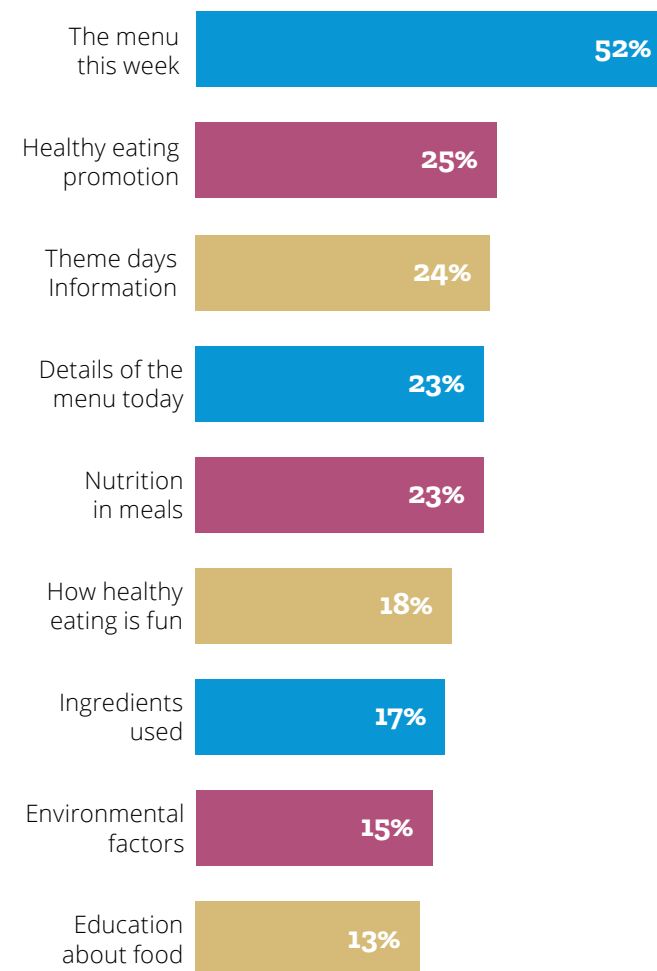
With meal pre-ordering option

- Too much **1%**
- Right amount **72%**
- Too little **28%**

No meal pre-ordering option

- Too much **2%**
- Right amount **52%**
- Too little **46%**

When we explored the type of information they want, the responses are wide-ranging. Menu practicalities dominate, with **52% 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, how it's promoted, or made fun.

Types of information parents would like their schools to provide

- The menu this week **52%**
- Healthy eating promotion **25%**
- Theme days Information **24%**
- Details of the menu today **23%**
- Nutrition in meals **23%**
- How healthy eating is fun **18%**
- Ingredients used **17%**
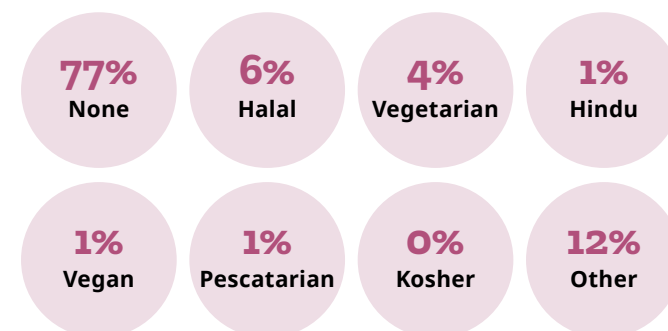- Environmental factors **15%**
- Education about food **13%**

Alternative diets and allergy management

Breakdown of alternative diets across UK nations

	Total	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Total	306,354	267,047	19,477	15,964	3,866
Halal	6%	6%	3%	4%	0%
Vegetarian	4%	4%	3%	3%	2%
Hindu	1%	1%	0%	1%	0%
Vegan	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%
Pescatarian	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%
Kosher	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Breakdown of alternative diets across England regions

	Total	North East	North West	Midlands	East Anglia	South West	South East	London
Total	267,047	33,813	46,569	58,269	14,783	33,349	39,969	33,243
None	76%	83%	78%	79%	84%	82%	80%	62%
Halal	6%	4%	8%	6%	2%	3%	4%	14%
Vegetarian	4%	3%	3%	4%	3%	4%	4%	6%
Hindu	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	4%
Vegan	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Pescatarian	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Kosher	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%
Other	12%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	14%

Nearly 1 in 4 have alternative dietary needs

Halal is the highest (amongst the pre-defined needs), accounting for 1 in 20 school children.

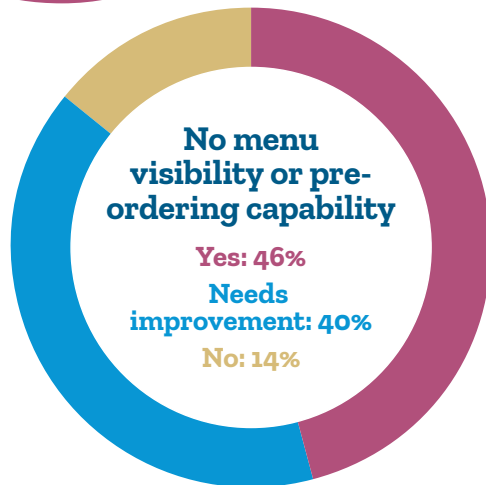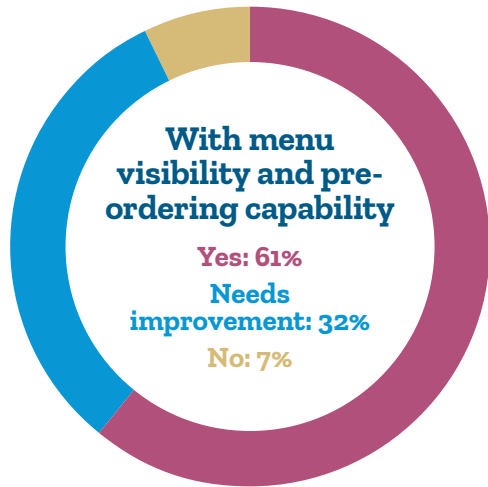| 77% None	6% Halal	4% Vegetarian	1% Hindu
1% Vegan	1% Pescatarian	0% Kosher	12% Other

12% of pupils

had alternative dietary requirements in 2021.

1 in 20 parents

surveyed have children with established food allergies that need catering for. Milk and peanut allergies sit at 2% each, with egg and cereals with gluten at 1%.

Impact of pre-ordering functionality on trusted allergy management:

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: 40%
No: 14%

Pre-booking options

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

66 They are brilliant with allergies and never had any issues. My son never misses out.'
Surveyed Parent

66 Slow response from the council meant we didn't get an allergy menu and there were miscommunications between them and the school. A faster response and better communication from the council to parents and the school would help improve this.'
Surveyed Parent

66 All done online and can speak to the teacher about allergies directly.' **Surveyed Parent**

How sensitively are allergies managed by schools?

Very: 25%   **Somewhat: 25%**   **Not: 12%**   **Not sure: 35%**

Positively, the 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.

Allergies are managed appropriately:

Yes: 48%
Yes, but could be improved: 37%
No: 15%

The majority of parents feel that their schools manage allergies well, with **nearly 50% having complete confidence** in them and **37% agreeing**, but suggesting improvement is needed.

Of the same group of parents, just over half feel that allergy management is handled with some sensitivity, but only one quarter feel it's managed 'very' sensitively. **highlighting some room for improvement in this area.**

Bullying due to allergies

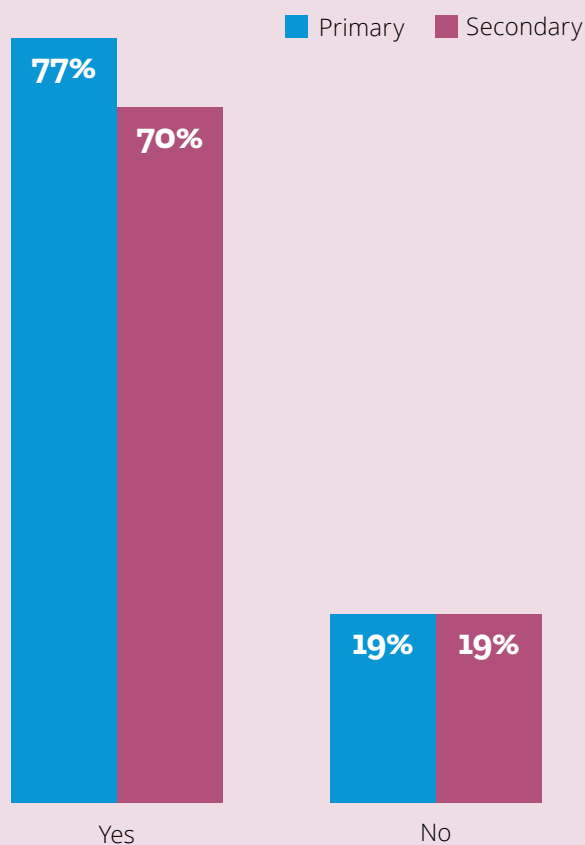**Currently: 3%**   **No: 87%**

In the past: 7%   **Prefer not to say: 3%**

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**

77%
70%
19% 19%

Yes   No

8 in 10 parents

say cash payments are a thing of the past.

1 in 10 can use cash

to pay for all school related spend. However, just **0.02% of parents who can use cash to pay want to continue doing so**. The vast majority use online payment methods when given the choice between cash and online.

Can parents still use cash for school payments?

Yes: 10%
Pay for school meals only: 2%
Pay for activities only: 5%
No: 83%

66% of primary school parents

would like the ability to see what school meals their child has eaten in the recent past, with **only 12% already having this available to them**.

"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. Even with the ever-increasing cost of living, school caterers are focused on and 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 on key issues that include:

   - allergen management

   - variety of meals on offer

   - healthy and nutritious menu choices

3. Considering the sustainability and ethical sourcing of ingredients is still definitely or somewhat a factor when choosing school meal provision for over 50% of parents.

4. Parents want to be involved in what their children are eating — with interest shown in having easier ways to view the menu, 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 reassure 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.

3. Food costs and wastage can be reduced using a digital meal management system.

4. Meal pre-ordering solutions greatly improve the chances of pupils receiving their first choice meal.

5. 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.

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