

Equality Act Review Campaign Policy Briefings

To inform Government and Parliamentary Debate

Why the Government should provide free school meals for children from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

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Background:

With hungry children struggling in the classroom, receiving good nutrition is crucial for the educational outcomes of children. Research shows that children consuming a nutritionally balanced and regular diet achieve higher grades, are better behaved and engaged with the classroom, and are more attuned to learning (Levin and Hewins, 2013). Furthermore, well-nourished children have higher participation levels in the school environment, taking part in extracurricular activities and positively socializing with other students (Ruffini, 2022). Free school meals also contribute significantly to childhood health outcomes outside of the school environment, when children have a balanced diet, increased food security and better household outcomes (Cohen et al, 2021). Additionally, low-income schools receive better financial outcomes through the providing of free school meals which will also benefit the local community (Cohen et al, 2021).

Current Provisions:

Currently, *universal free school meals are only provided to children in Reception, Years 1 or 2, and who go to government funded schools.* Outside of this, free school meals

are only provided based on a household income basis to support those in a state of socioeconomic deprivation. Parents and children who receive support from specific

welfare schemes such as receiving Universal Credit, Jobseekers allowance, income related Employment and Support allowance, Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, Pension Credit, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit run on, or Income Support are those that are additionally eligible for free school meals. Finally, this scheme also supports children who have parents receiving the above welfare benefits and are below the compulsory age for starting school.

Recommendations:

We recommend that under the Equality Act 2010, free school meals are universalised and provided for children of all ages and from all socioeconomic backgrounds in government funded schools. Many children from low-income families currently experience significant stigma as a result of using the free school meals which can have a negative impact on their educational and social outcomes in the school environment. Furthermore, many parents just outside of this eligibility criteria, who still feel the pressures of socioeconomic deprivation, struggle to provide a well-balanced and nutritional diet for their children and cannot afford the cost of school meals.

Reforming the free school meals scheme is increasingly pertinent in a climate with exponentially increasing living costs where austerity and poverty are being felt more significantly than ever before.

References:

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