

# CASE STUDY OF UK SCHOOL MEALS

## SUMMARY

### HISTORY AND EVOLUTION

The UK is home to the **world's oldest school meals programme**, dating back to **1906** when free school meals (FSM) were introduced for impoverished children. School food policy and provision have expanded and evolved since then but the core purpose of providing a **safety net** for children who need it endures. School food provision has developed beyond just delivering school lunches to encompass breakfasts, fruit and vegetable schemes, after-school provisions, milk schemes, holiday provisions, and food education.

Each **devolved nation** has developed its own programmes and policies. Wales and Scotland have **universal free school meals** (UFSM) provision in primary school whilst England and Northern Ireland have partial provision. In Scotland, children in early years settings and the first five years of primary school are eligible for UFSM, with plans to expand this to years 6 and 7 over the next year. Wales began rolling out UFSM in 2022, to reach all primary school children by 2024. In England, pupils aged 4-7 are entitled to universal infant free school meals (UIFSM).

Means-tested FSM is available in all four nations to families with a household income of less than **£16,190** (if in receipt of certain means-tested benefits) or **£14,000** (if in receipt of Universal Credit) in Northern Ireland, **£7,920** in Scotland, and **£7,400** in England and Wales (before tax and excluding benefits).

### POLICY TIMELINE

EDUCATION PROVISION OF MEALS ACT	1906
FIRST NATIONAL SCHOOL MEALS POLICY	1941
NEW EDUCATION ACT REQUIRED SCHOOL MEALS TO SUFFICE AS THE MAIN MEAL OF THE DAY	1944
NEW EDUCATION ACT ABANDONED PROVISION OF MILK AND REDUCED NUMBER OF CHILDREN ELIGIBLE FOR FSM	1980
SCHOOL FOOD STANDARDS INTRODUCED	2000
MANDATORY NUTRITIONAL SCHOOL FOOD STANDARDS INTRODUCED IN NORTHERN IRELAND	2005
SCOTTISH HEALTH PROMOTION AND NUTRITION ACT	2007
ENGLAND SCHOOL FOOD PLAN PUBLISHED	2013
UNIVERSAL INFANT FREE SCHOOL MEALS (UIFSM)	2014
ENGLAND MANDATORY SCHOOL FOOD STANDARDS INTRODUCED	2015
FSM EXTENDED AND CASH SUBSTITUTE PROVIDED DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN AND HOLIDAYS	2020
UFSM FOR PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN WALES BEGAN ROLL OUT	2022
GOOD FOOD NATION ACT PASSED IN SCOTLAND	

**10.4 m**

Pupils in the UK

**29,474**

Government-funded schools in the UK

**>1.29 bn**

Meals provided annually

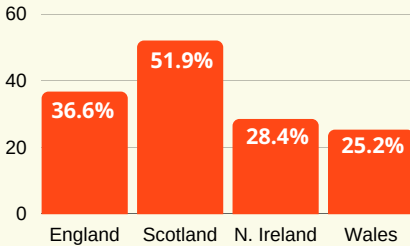


# FOUR DEVOLVED NATION SYSTEMS



## Eligibility for Free School Meals

As a percentage of total number of children in primary and secondary school in each nation



Uptake of FSM varies e.g. in Northern Ireland 76.4% pupils take up the FSM they are entitled to whilst in Scotland uptake is 67.2%

## Conceptual and Legislative Frameworks across the UK

Each devolved nation has its own policy framework and national culture surrounding school meals. This means that within the UK there are four distinct systems of school food policy and provision. The differences between the systems create opportunities for learning and development between them which ultimately benefits the entire UK school food system.

### SCOTLAND

The **Good Food Nation Act (2022)** conceptualises public food, including school meals, as a driver for **food systems change** in Scotland, highlighting the importance of sustainability in procurement, policy development and implementation. Scotland has achieved a **political consensus** in favour of UFSM. Scotland carries out **formal inspections** in its monitoring and evaluation and is among the world's most **highly regulated** systems in terms of school nutritional and food standards.

### NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland's **Healthy Foods for Healthy Outcomes Food in Schools Policy** advocates a **whole school approach** and developing knowledge and skills in relation to healthy eating. Higher eligibility threshold criteria for FSM ensures more children have access than in other UK contexts using a means-tested FSM system whilst the **Food in Schools Forum** enables inter-departmental dialogue in Northern Ireland.

### ENGLAND

England's school food policy takes a **whole school approach**. The policy has been driven by incorporating **health, food security** and **learning outcomes**, as opposed to being guided by an overarching rights-based framework

### WALES

Wales has a long-term vision for school meals as articulated by the **Wellbeing for Future Generations Act (2015)** coupled with a culture of children's rights, such as **right to healthy food** and a determination that **no child should go hungry**.

# LESSONS LEARNED AND BEST PRACTICES



## 1. ENDURANCE



The UK school food system has endured **over a century** of societal change, evolving and expanding despite over **30 changes of government**. Norms and expectations around school food have become embedded in UK society, protecting and preserving the system.

## 2. CROSS-LEARNING



Each devolved nation has organically developed its **own policies, programmes, and delivery mechanisms** which creates opportunities for jurisdictions to **learn from one another** to improve the system as a whole.

## 3. PARTNERSHIPS



The UK exhibits a **collaborative** school meals system in which food is driven and delivered through **effective partnerships**, including with schools, caterers, and local authorities.

## 4. MULTIPLE DRIVERS AND MULTI-SECTORAL RETURNS



There are multiple drivers of change in school policy, ranging from **long-term vision and planning** to responding to **food insecurity**, believing in **equity** and the **right to food**, and concerns about **public health** among others. The return on investing in UK school meals is therefore a **multi-sectoral return**.

## 5. WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH



A **whole school approach** understands that school meals are about **more than hunger**. It values educating young people about food through the curriculum, offering healthy food throughout the school environment, and fostering a social setting to enjoy eating together.



The school food system can benefit from taking a principles-based approach. This includes independent monitoring and evaluation, joined-up thinking and delivery, treating the whole child (and society), and expanding school meals provision in recognition of the right to food.

## UK Case Study Interlocutors

### England

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### Scotland

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Argyll and Bute Council

**PROFESSOR JOHN MCKENDRICK**  
Glasgow Caledonian University

### Northern Ireland

**DR SINÉAD FUREY**  
Ulster University

**PROFESSOR JAYNE WOODSIDE**  
Queen's University Belfast

### Wales

**PROFESSOR SINEAD BROPHY**  
Swansea University

**DR KATHERINE WOOLLEY**  
Public Health Wales

## CALL TO ACTION



Read and  
share the  
devolved  
nation case  
studies



**School  
Meals  
Coalition**  
Nutrition, Health and  
Education for Every Child

The **School Meals Coalition** was established in 2021 by 70+ member states whose governments have pledged to rebuild, improve, or scale up their national school health and nutrition programmes following the impact of COVID-19 school closures, which deprived an estimated 370 million children of their daily school meal.

## Secretariat

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MEDICINE



Research  
Consortium for  
**SHN**



**The Research Consortium  
for School Health and  
Nutrition** was created by the  
School Meals Coalition to  
provide national  
policymakers with credible,  
independent evidence on  
school meals and school  
health services.

**The World Food Programme**  
is a United Nations agency  
fighting global hunger. It is  
one of the largest providers  
of school meals globally and  
the Secretariat for the  
School Meals Coalition.

### The "Good Examples" Community of Practice

The case studies were coordinated by one of the five global Communities of Practice, in this case co-chaired by Heli Kuusipalo, Senior Researcher at the National Institute for Health and Welfare (Finland), and Sylvie Avallone, Professor at L'Institut Agro (France).