

Research Briefing

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Food poverty: Households, food banks and free school meals

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Summary

In 2021/22 there were 4.7 million people, or 7% of the UK population, in households experiencing food poverty, including 12% of children.

In 2022/23, the Trussell Trust, a charity and network of foodbanks, supplied the highest recorded number of three-day emergency food parcels.

This briefing provides statistics on food poverty in the UK, including food banks and free school meals.

What is food poverty?

There is no widely accepted definition of ‘food poverty’. However, a household can broadly be defined as experiencing food poverty or ‘household food insecurity’ if they cannot (or are uncertain about whether they can) acquire “[an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways](#)”.

According to the Department for Work and Pensions’ (DWP) [Households Below Average Income survey](#), in 2021/22, 4.7 million people (7%) in the UK were in food insecure households. Among the 11.0 million people found to be in relative poverty before housing costs, 15% were in food insecure households, including 21% of children. People in relative poverty live in a household with income less than 60% of the contemporary median income.

Food bank use in the UK

Food banks are run by charities and are intended as a temporary provision to supply emergency food.

The DWP published statistics on food bank use for the first time in March 2023. In 2021/22, 2.1 million people in the UK lived in household which had used a food bank in the previous 12 months, a rate of 3%. This includes 6% of children, 3% of working-age adults, and around 0% of pensioners.

In 2022/23, [the Trussell Trust supplied 2.99 million three-day emergency food parcels](#), the highest recorded number and an increase of 37% on the previous year.

How the rising cost of living affects food insecurity

Food prices have been rising since the second half of 2021. [Food and non-alcoholic drink prices were 19.1% higher in the 12 months to March 2023, the highest since 1977. In July 2023, food inflation was 14.8%.](#)

In July and August 2023, [56% of adults in Great Britain reported an increase in their cost of living compared with the month before](#) according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Of these, 97% saw the price of their food shopping go up, and 47% had started spending less on essentials including food.

The rising cost of living seems to be increasing household food insecurity. A [YouGov survey by the Food Foundation](#), a food poverty charity, found that in June 2023, 17.0% of households in the UK were ‘food insecure’ (ate less or went a day without eating because they couldn’t access or afford food), up from 8.8% in January 2022 and 7.4% in January 2021.

More than [760,000 people used a Trussell Trust food bank for the first time in 2022/23](#), a 38% increase from 2021/22.

Free school meals in England

In England, free school meals (FSM) are a statutory entitlement available to eligible pupils. Local authorities are responsible for providing FSM.

In January 2023, there were around [2.0 million pupils known to be eligible for FSM, representing 23.8% of state funded pupils](#). This eligibility rate has increased particularly sharply in the last few years (since 2018) and is the highest rate recorded since the current time series began in 2006.

This increase could be driven by many factors including macro-economic conditions, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the continued effect of [the transitional protections during the rollout of Universal Credit](#).

Free school meals and educational attainment

On average, pupils eligible for free school meals achieve lower GCSE attainment than other pupils. This is based on achieving a “standard pass” in English and maths GCSE. Government statistics show that in 2022, [47% of pupils eligible for FSM achieved a standard pass in both English and Maths GCSE compared to 75% of pupils not eligible](#). This was an attainment gap of around 28 percentage points.

1 Food poverty

1.1 What is food poverty?

There is no widely accepted definition of food poverty, but a household can broadly be defined as experiencing food poverty if they: cannot (or are uncertain about whether they can) acquire “an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways”.¹

Food poverty is often used as synonymous with **household food insecurity**.² Household food insecurity is defined in broadly the same way across several countries:³

- ‘Low food security’ means that the household reduces the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets.
- ‘Very low food security’ means that household members sometimes disrupt eating patterns or reduce food intake because they lack money or other resources for food.

Households can have low food security even when the UK as a whole has high food security, as discussed in Box 1 on page 10.

Causes of household food insecurity

Income

Food poverty, or household food insecurity, is largely a symptom of low income. Food insecure households may not be able to afford the cost of enough good quality food, or the associated transport or delivery costs. In this way, food poverty is similar to other types of poverty.⁴ As discussed in section 3, high food prices also contribute to household food insecurity.

One reason why food poverty is a particularly visible form of poverty is that food budgets are relatively elastic compared to other essential living costs. This means that cuts can be made to a food budget that cannot be made to

¹ Child Poverty Action Group, [Living Hand to Mouth](#), 26 March 2019

² Sustain, [What is food poverty?](#), and Child Poverty Action Group, [Living Hand to Mouth](#), 26 March 2019.

³ This definition is based on the Household Food Security Survey Module, developed by the US Department of Agriculture. Source: US Department of Agriculture, [Food Security in the US](#) (Accessed 28 April 2021)

⁴ House of Lords Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment, [Hungry for change: fixing the failures in food](#), 6 July 2020, p41

other costs, like rent or fuel payments.⁵ Helen Barnard from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggested that food “is quite often one of the first things that people on low income start cutting back on or making trades about.”⁶

Access to food

Household food insecurity can also occur when nutritious food is not available to households because of the area they live in, personal circumstances of household members, or external factors.

For example, in the first weeks of the coronavirus pandemic, households reported being food insecure because supermarket shelves were empty, or because they were shielding at home and could not arrange for food to be delivered. The Food Foundation found that, of the 8 million adults who experienced food insecurity in the first two weeks of lockdown, 50% were unable to get the food they needed due to shortages, 25% were unable to leave their homes and had no other way to get the food they needed, and 21% didn't have enough money to buy adequate food supplies.⁷

Ability to prepare food

The ability and opportunity to prepare food also affects food security. Factors which could prevent this include disabilities, lack of infrastructure, the energy costs of cooking and the lack of skills or time.⁸

Sharing food within households

Not everyone in food insecure households experiences it directly. Children in food insecure households do not always experience hunger or insufficient food, as parents often skip meals to ensure their children are fed.⁹

⁵ Child poverty Action Group, [Living Hand to Mouth](#), 26 March 2019

⁶ Submission to the Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment, [Hungry for change: fixing the failures in food](#), 6 July 2020, p41

⁷ The Food Foundation, [A crisis within a crisis: The impact of Covid-19 on household food insecurity](#), 1 March 2021

⁸ Defra, [United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021: Theme 4: Food Security at Household Level](#), 22 December 2021

⁹ Child poverty Action Group, [Living Hand to Mouth](#), 26 March 2019

UK food security versus household food insecurity

The Library Insight [Food security: What is it and how is it measured?](#) (February 2020) discusses UK food security.

Food security includes the ability of individual households to obtain food, but it can also be used at a national level to refer to **a country's ability** to feed itself. This means individual households in the UK can have very low food security, even while the UK as a whole has very high food security.

The Government last undertook a full assessment of UK food security in 2009/10, when it found that “by any objective measure, we enjoy a high degree of food security in the UK today”.¹⁰ The [Agriculture Act 2020](#) introduced a duty on the Government to report to Parliament on UK food security at least every three years.¹¹ The first report was published in December 2021.¹²

1.2 Food insecurity statistics

In 2021/22, 4.7 million people in the UK (7%) were in food insecure households in the UK, according to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)'s Household Below Average Income publication. This included 12% of children, 7% of working-age adults, and 1% of pensioners.¹³ The percentage of children in food insecurity was higher in 2021/22 than in 2020/21, when 9% of children were in food insecure households. In 2020/21, 6% of all individuals were in food insecure households.¹⁴

The chart below breaks down food security by status (low and very low). 4% of working-age adults and 5% of children lived in households with **very low** food security in 2021/22.

¹⁰ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, [Food security](#) (archived 2 April 2013). The Food Security Assessment was reviewed by the Coalition Government in 2012 and found to be still relevant; see Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [Food security](#), HC 243, 1 July 2014, para 5.

¹¹ Agriculture Act 2020, [section 19](#). The first report falls due “on or before [...] the last day before 25 December 2021 which is a sitting day for both Houses of Parliament”.

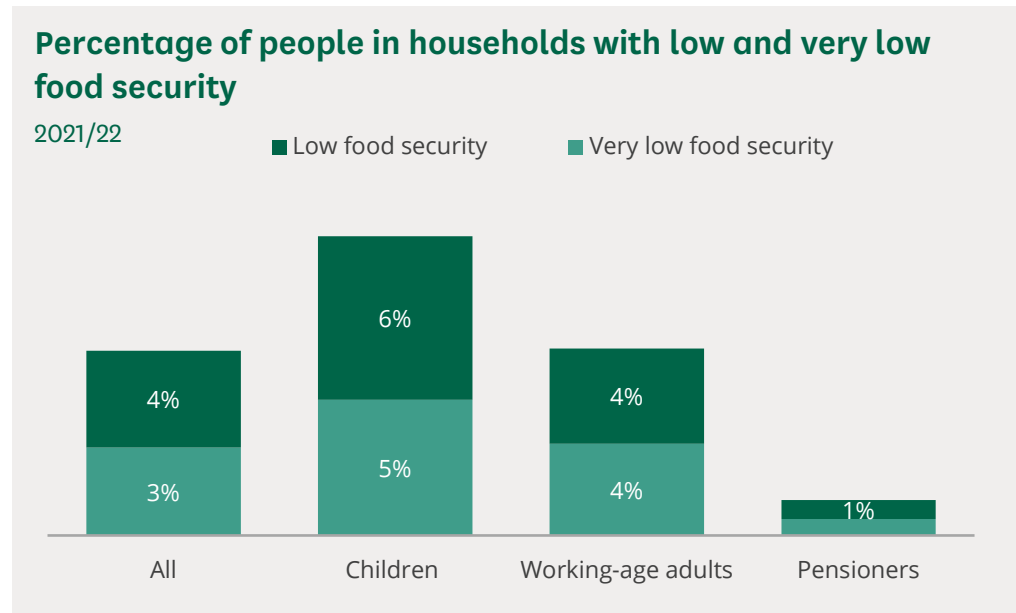
¹² Defra, [United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021](#), 16 December 2021

¹³ The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) announced it would add household food insecurity questions to the Family Resources Survey in 2019, and [data was first published in March 2021](#).

¹⁴ Data collection for 2020/21 was affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Figures for 2020/21 should be used with caution.

‘Low’ and ‘very low’ food security

‘Low food security’ means the household reduces the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets. ‘Very low food security’ means household members sometimes disrupt eating patterns or reduce food intake because they lack money or other resources for food.



Source: DWP, [Households Below Average Income](#), Tables 9.1b, 9.3b, 9.5b, 9.7b

Poverty and food insecurity

Since household food insecurity in the UK is largely due to low incomes, it is unsurprising that food insecurity is more prevalent in households in poverty.

In 2021/22, 1.7 million people in relative poverty before housing costs lived in food insecure households (households with either low or very low food security), including 600,000 children.¹⁵

The chart below shows that 21% of children, 17% of working-age adults, and 3% of pensioners who were in relative poverty (measured before housing costs are considered) were living in food insecure households. People in relative poverty refers to people living in a household with income less than 60% of contemporary median income. 11.0 million people were in relative poverty in 2021/22. The median is the point where half of household incomes are higher, and half are lower.

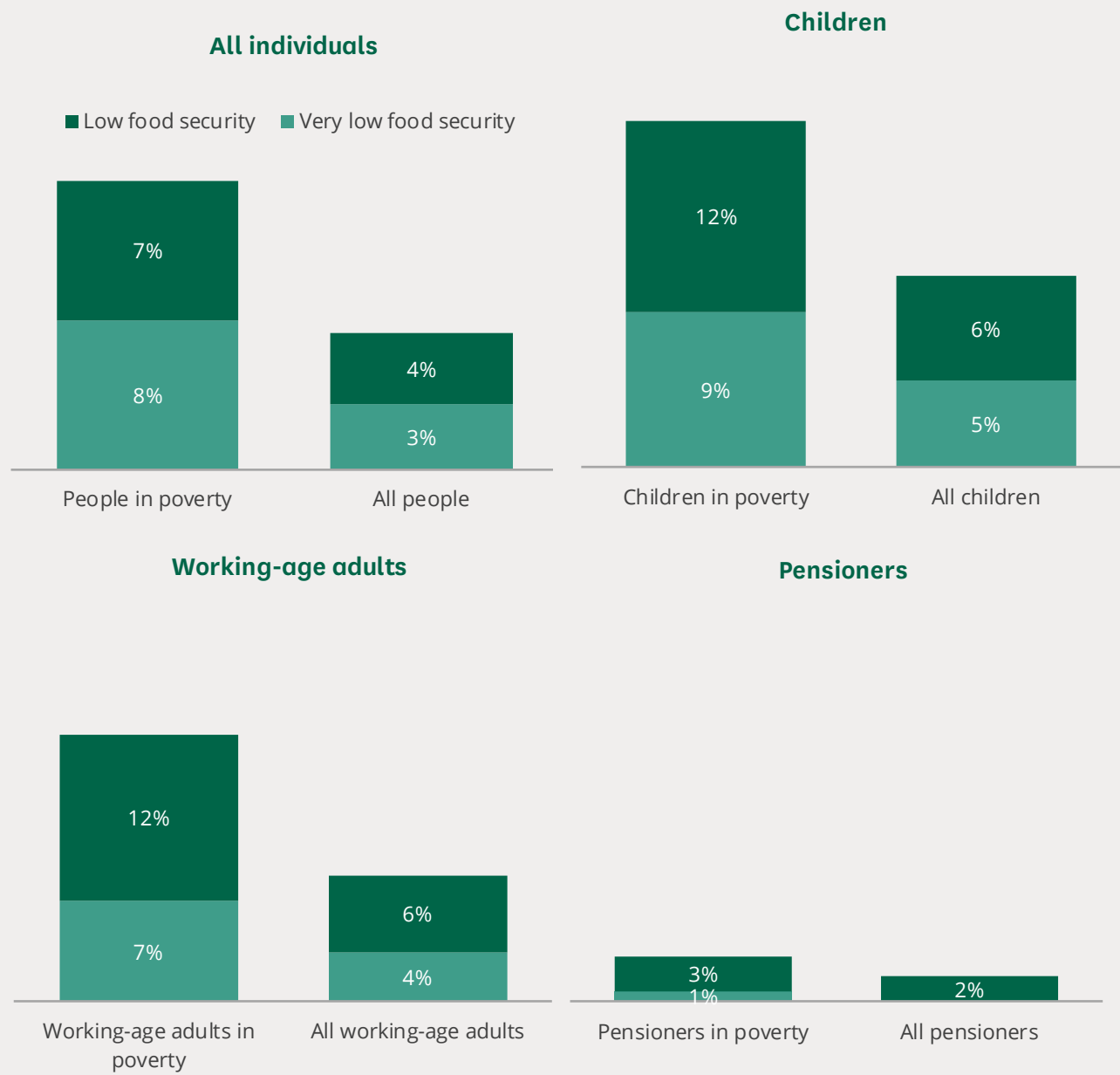
9% of working-age adults, 9% of children, and 1% of pensioners who were in relative poverty before housing costs lived in households with very low food security.

The Library paper [Poverty in the UK: statistics](#) provides more information and statistics about poverty.

¹⁵ DWP, [Households Below Average Income](#), 2023

Percentage of people in households with low and very low food security

People in relative poverty versus all people, 2021/22



Source: DWP, [Households Below Average Income](#), Tables 9.1b, 9.3b, 9.5b, 9.7b

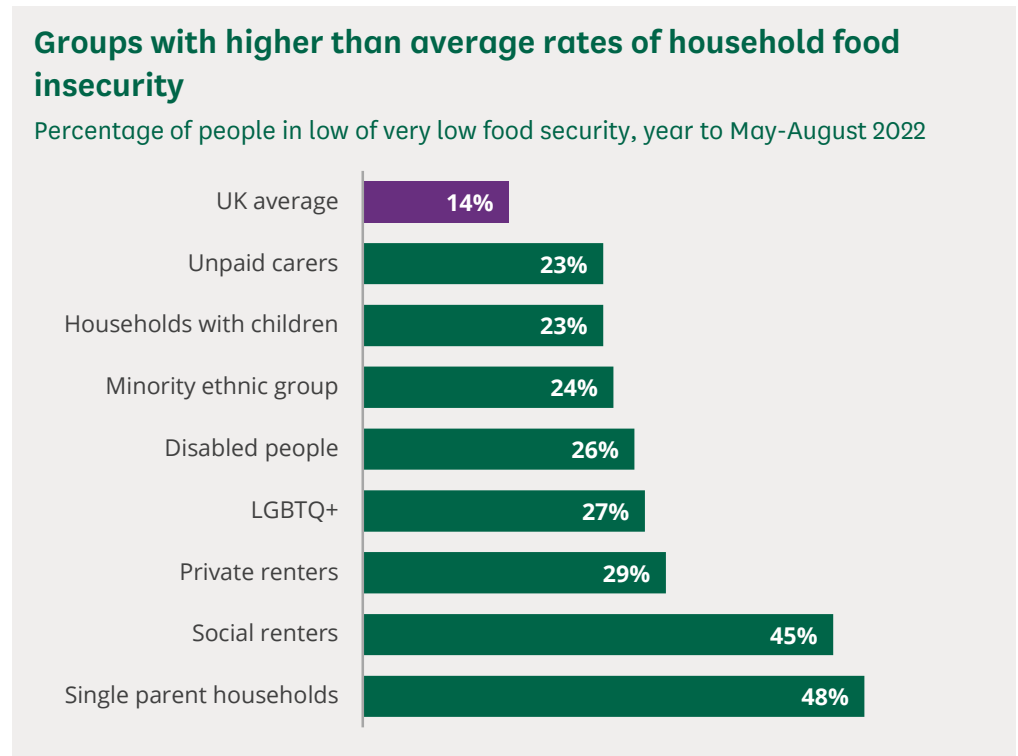
Some groups are more likely to experience food insecurity

The Trussell Trust commissioned a survey in May to August 2022 about food insecurity, using the same definition as the DWP in the data above, but asking about people's experience of food insecurity in the previous 12 months instead of the previous three months. The Trussell Trust found that 14% of people in the UK experienced food insecurity in the year to May to August 2022.¹⁶

¹⁶ Trussell Trust, [Hunger in the UK](#), June 2023

Some groups had higher rates of food insecurity than others, including households with children (especially single parent households), renters, LGBTQ+ people, disabled people, people from a minority ethnic group and unpaid carers.

The Trussell Trust report [Hunger in the UK](#) provides more detail.



Source: Trussell Trust, [Hunger in the UK](#), June 2023

1.3

Government Food Strategy for England

In 2019, the then Defra Secretary of State, Michael Gove, commissioned “[an independent review to help the government create its first National Food Strategy for 75 years](#)”. The review was led by Henry Dimbleby, co-founder of Leon restaurants and lead non-executive director at Defra.¹⁷ The National Food Strategy was intended to cover “the entire food chain, from field to fork”, primarily in England. It intended to ensure the food system “delivers safe, healthy, affordable food; regardless of where people live or how much they earn”.¹⁸

[Part one of the review](#) was published in July 2020. It contained “urgent recommendations to support this country through the turbulence caused by the Covid-19 pandemic”, as well as to prepare for the end of the Brexit transition period in December 2020. It included a chapter on ‘jobs and hunger’, examining “the ways in which poverty can lead not only to people going hungry, but also to them relying on diets that are more likely to damage their health”, and made recommendations to Government. Part two was published in 2022, and contained more recommendations, including a plan to “reduce diet-related inequality”.¹⁹

The Government published the [Government Food Strategy](#) for England in June 2022. This contained a chapter on healthier and sustainable eating, which highlighted trends in diet and obesity. It highlighted the Dimbleby review’s focus on “the Junk Food Cycle”, whereby “we have a predilection for calorie dense foods, which means food companies invest more time and money creating these foods, which makes us eat more of them and expands the market, which leads to more investment, which makes us eat more”.²⁰

The Government Food Strategy acknowledged that “overall, choosing the healthier option is often much more challenging, with the range of healthier choices often declining the poorer you are with additional barriers such as convenience and access hindering those on lower incomes from consuming a healthier diet”. It added that the link between deprivation and dietary outcomes was “also about having the equipment, cooking skills, and time to prepare and cook healthier food than more convenient alternatives, which can be high in fat, salt and sugar, and may not be as readily available to those on low incomes”.²¹

The Government outlined actions it would take in this area, including: funding research into the link between ultra-processed food and obesity; trials of interventions in the food system; learning from the approaches taken by Local

¹⁷ Defra, [National Food Strategy - Call for Evidence](#) [accessed 30 April 2021]

¹⁸ Defra, [Developing a national food strategy: independent review 2019 – terms of reference](#), updated 29 July 2020

¹⁹ [National Food Strategy: The Report](#), July 2021, pp144-261

²⁰ [National Food Strategy: the Plan](#), July 2021, p 49

²¹ Defra, [Government food strategy](#), 13 June 2022, 2.1.6

Food Partnerships;²² and promoting a “whole school” approach to school food.²³

Responses to the Government Food Strategy

There were mixed reactions to the Government Food Strategy when it was published in June 2022. The Local Government Association (LGA) said it had [missed an opportunity to address problems affecting access to food](#):

Everyone should have access to healthy and affordable food. The strategy response represents a missed opportunity to tackle the underlying causes of a variety of issues, many of which will continue to be exacerbated by the growing cost of living crisis. Unless the government takes urgent action, health inequalities will widen and its ambition to halve childhood obesity by 2030 will be missed.²⁴

Similarly, the Food Foundation said the strategy had “[missed the mark](#)”:

Hopes were high that the Government’s Food Strategy would set out a long-term plan for incentivising the food system to shift towards the provision of nourishing, sustainable and affordable food, and away from food which makes us sick. With the prices of food and fuel surging, this ambition is more urgent than ever, as more and more households who are struggling to pay the bills are put at even greater risk of diet-related disease. Disappointingly, today’s publication mostly misses this mark.²⁵

The Food and Drink Federation (FDF), which represents the food and drink manufacturing industry, [broadly welcomed the strategy](#) but said there was “more the Government can do”. This included helping the food and drink sector invest in technology to increase productivity.²⁶

The National Education Union (NEU) highlighted that the Government’s Food Strategy [excluded recommendations by Henry Dimbleby for free school meals](#) to be extended to all households receiving Universal Credit. The NEU described this as “an extraordinary decision, given rising costs and the Government’s promises to ‘level up’”. The Union added that:

Families receiving Universal Credit absolutely must be able to receive free school meals and we think the extension in eligibility simply can’t wait. This policy will result in a great many young people going hungry, and this is a totally unacceptable position for a Government to take. Heads are also concerned that school funding isn’t keeping up with the actual cost of free school meals, and this really matters if we want meals to be healthy and nutritious.²⁷

²² Local food partnerships “help coordinate action on dysfunctions and opportunities for change in local food systems.” Sustain, [Report: The value of local food partnerships, Covid and beyond](#), 18 March 2022

²³ Defra, [Government food strategy](#), 13 June 2022, section 2.2.4

²⁴ Local Government Association, [LGA response to the Government’s food strategy](#), 13 June 2022

²⁵ Food Foundation, [Our reaction to the Government’s Food Strategy](#), 13 June 2022

²⁶ Food and Drink federation, [The FDF responds to the UK Government’s food strategy](#), 13 June 2022

²⁷ NEU, [Government food strategy rejects extension of free school meals](#), 13 June 2022.

Health disparities white paper

In its June 2022 food strategy, the Government stated that “The Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC)’s forthcoming health disparities white paper will also set out further measures to reduce obesity by setting out our approach to working with the food industry to create a healthier food environment for all and investing in innovative approaches to address weight and diet related ill health”.²⁸

In January 2023, in response to a Parliamentary Question on when the Government intended to publish the health disparities white paper, Neil O’Brien, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department of Health and Social Care said that the [Government would instead publish a Major Conditions Strategy](#):

On 24 January 2023 the Government announced that it will publish a Major Conditions Strategy and an interim report will be published in the summer. The strategy will set out a strong and coherent policy agenda that sets out a shift to integrated, whole-person care. Interventions set out in the strategy will aim to alleviate pressure on the health system, as well as support the government’s objective to increase healthy life expectancy and reduce ill-health related labour market inactivity.

The strategy will tackle conditions that contribute most to morbidity and mortality across the population in England including, cancers, cardiovascular disease, including stroke and diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases, dementia, mental ill health and musculoskeletal conditions. Health disparities exist across a wide variety of conditions from cancer to mental health, and contribute to this variation in life expectancy.

The Major Conditions Strategy will apply a geographical lens to each condition to address regional disparities in health outcomes, supporting the levelling up mission to narrow the gap by 2030. As material for the Major Conditions Strategy will therefore cover many of the same areas as the Health Disparities White Paper, we will no longer be publishing it.²⁹

²⁸ Defra, [Government food strategy](#), 13 June 2022, section 2.1.10

²⁹ PQ 128715, [on [Health: Disadvantaged](#)], 20 January 2023

2 Food banks

Unlike free school meals, discussed in section 3, food banks are run by charities and have only existed in the UK in their current form for around twenty years.³⁰ Organisations who run and coordinate food banks like the [Trussell Trust](#) and the [Independent Food Aid Network](#) (IFAN), say they intend food banks to be a temporary way to supply emergency food aid, not a long term solution to household food insecurity.³¹

The Library briefing [Food banks in the UK](#) provides statistics on the use of food banks, as well as the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, data for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and information on other food aid provision like meal providers, social supermarkets and breakfast clubs for school children.

2.1 Official statistics on food bank use

The DWP published statistics on food bank use as part of HBAI for the first time in March 2023. In 2021/22, 2.1 million people in the UK lived in household which had used a food bank in the previous 12 months, a rate of 3%. This includes 6% of children, 3% of working-age adults, and around 0% of pensioners.

Among those in relative low income before housing costs, 8% lived in a household that had used a food bank in the previous 12 months, including 12% of children, 9% of working-age adults, and 1% of pensioners.³²

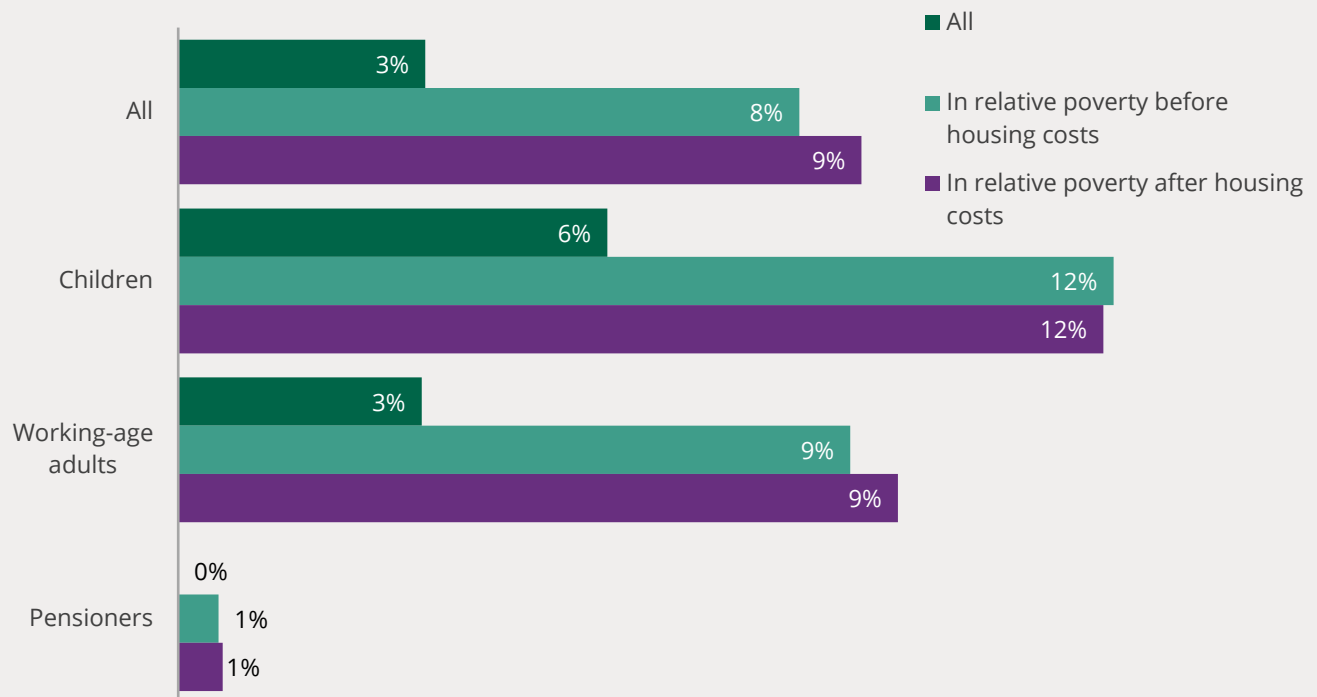
³⁰ Trussell Trust, [Our Story](#) (Accessed 14 June 2023)

³¹ Trussell Trust, [Our Strategic Plan](#) (Accessed 14 June 2023, IFAN, [Home](#) (Accessed 14 June 2023)

³² DWP, [Households Below Average Income, 2021/22](#), Tables 9.1b, 9.3b, 9.5b, and 9.7b

People who have used a food bank within the last 12 months, 2021/22

Percentage of people by population group and relative poverty status



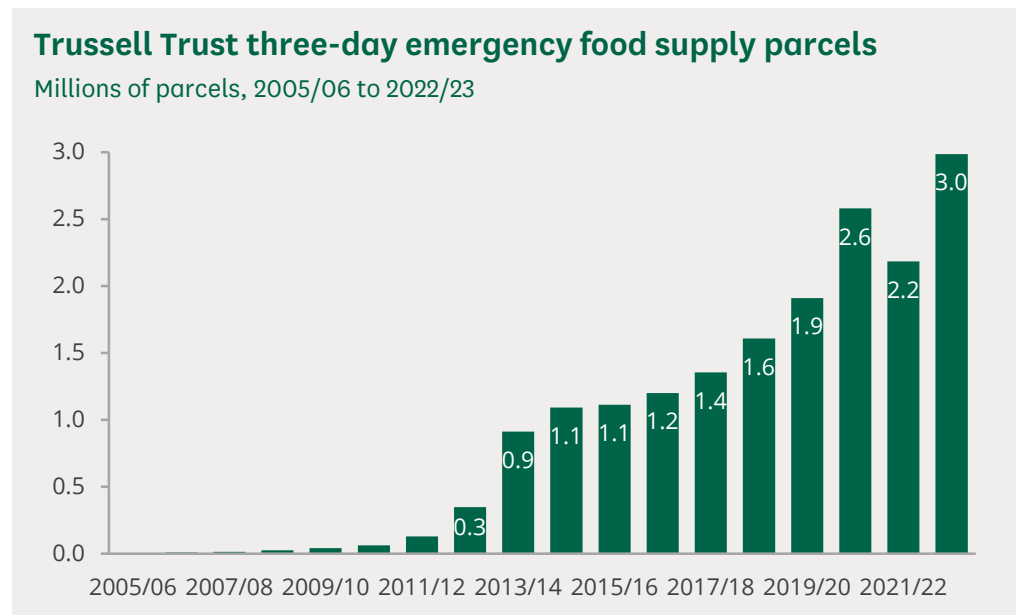
Source: DWP, [Households Below Average Income](#), Tables 9.1b, 9.3b, 9.5b, 9.7b

2.2 Trussell Trust data on food bank use

The Trussell Trust publishes data on the number of 'three-day emergency food parcels' it provides in its food bank network [twice a year on its website](#).

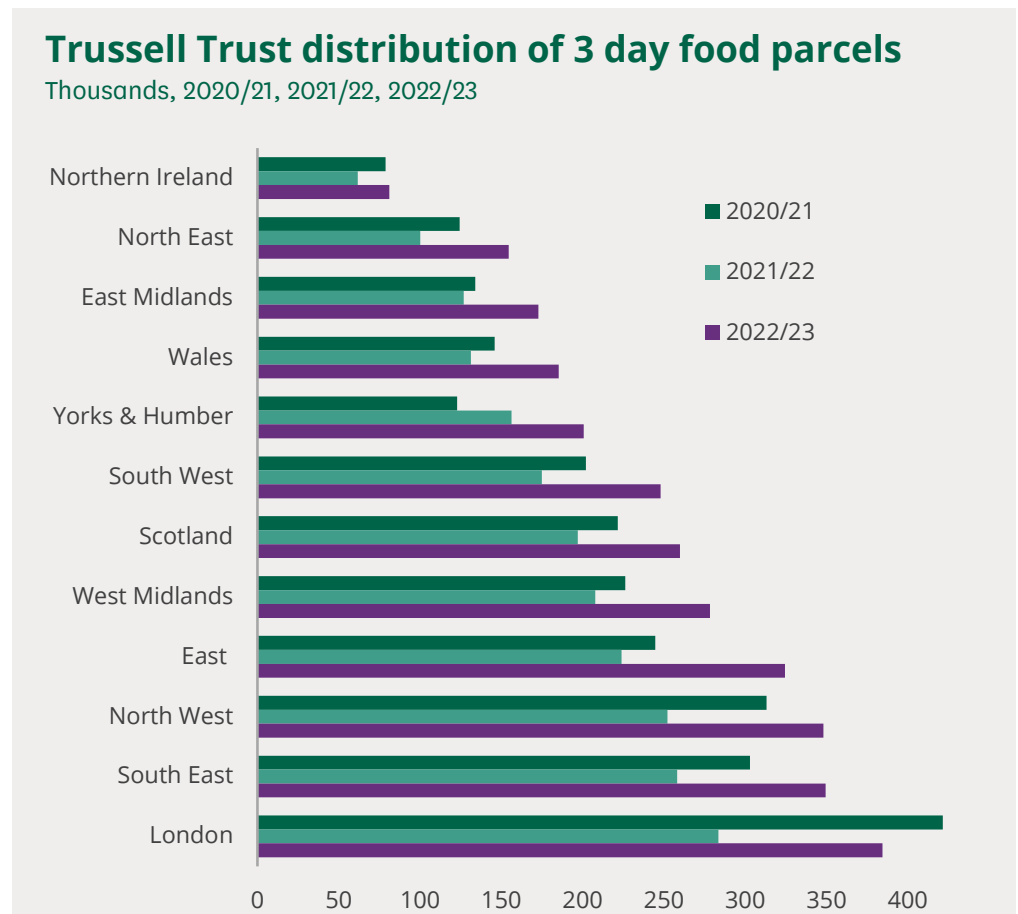
In 2022/23, the Trussell Trust supplied 2.99 million three-day emergency food parcels, the highest recorded number and an increase of 37% on the previous year. The number of parcels reached 2.58 million in 2020/21 due to the coronavirus pandemic and then fell in 2021/22. In 2022/23 it rose to above pandemic levels, and the Trussell Trust say this is [due to the rise in the cost of living](#).

This data does not include all food parcels distributed because of the large number of independent food banks who also distribute food parcels but are not part of the Trussell Trust network.



Source: [Trussell Trust, End of year Stats, 2023](#)

Food bank usage varies across UK countries and regions. Food bank use increased in every UK country and region between 2021/22 and 2022/23, with the highest percentage change in the North East (54%). Food bank use in every country and region was also higher in 2022/23 than in 2020/21, apart from in London, which food bank use was 9% less.



Source: [Trussell Trust, End of year Stats, 2023](#)

The characteristics of food bank users

In May to August 2022, the Trussell Trust commissioned a survey of users of Trussell Trust food banks as well as a survey of the wider population and compared the results. The Trussell Trust found that food bank users were more likely to have the following characteristics than the UK population as a whole:

- 89% of people referred to a Trussell Trust food bank in the year to May to August 2022 received means-test benefits, compared to 7% of people in the UK as a whole.
- People living in social housing made up 46% of those using Trussell Trust food banks and 8% of all people in the UK.
- 69% of those referred to Trussell Trust food banks met the Equality Act 2010 definition of disability, compared to 26% of people in the UK.³³ 75% of Trussell Trust food bank users said they or a member of their household is disabled.
- Single adults living with children under the age of 16 made up 20% of those referred to Trussell Trust food banks and 3% of the UK population.
- 16% of people referred to Trussell Trust food banks had experienced being in care, compared to 3% of people in the UK.
- 2% of Trussell Trust food bank users were asylum seekers, compared to 0.5% of people in the UK.

Some groups, such as people from a minority ethnic group, LGBTQ+ people and informal carers were more likely than average to experience food insecurity but less likely than average to use Trussell Trust food banks. This may be because they receive support elsewhere or may reflect barriers in accessing support from food banks.³⁴

2.3

How many food banks are there in the UK?

There is no database of all UK food banks, but data from the Trussell Trust and the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) can help us estimate how many are in the UK.

The Trussell Trust has the UK's largest network of food banks. It includes over 1,646 food bank centres in all four nations of the UK as of 2023. IFAN is the UK

³³ Disability is defined in the Equality Act as having a physical or mental impairment that has both a long term but also substantial impact on people

³⁴ Trussell Trust, [Hunger in the UK](#), June 2023

network for independent (non-Trussell Trust) food aid providers. There are at least 1,172 independent food banks in the UK today.³⁵

Added to the Trussell Trust's 1,646 this makes over 2,800 food banks in total.³⁶

³⁵ [IFAN on Trussell Trust and independent food bank numbers](#). This does not include those operating from schools, mentioned in the [National Governance Association Report](#) of 2 September 2019.

³⁶ The Government does not maintain statistics on food banks – see [WPO UIN 121155](#)

3 Food poverty and the rising cost of living

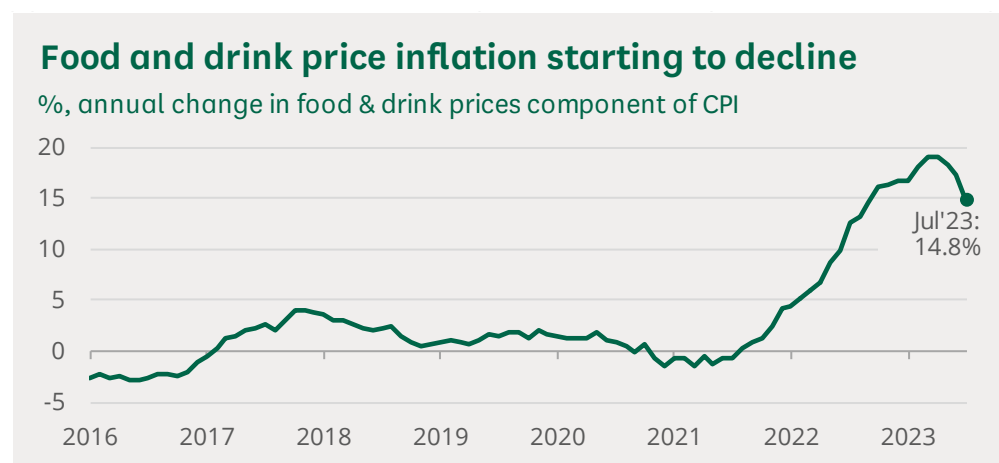
3.1 Food prices are rising

Rising prices are affecting household budgets, and more households are experiencing food insecurity.

The Library briefing [Rising cost of living in the UK](#) provides more detail on rising prices and their impact on households, particularly low-income households.

Food prices have been increasing since mid-2021

Food prices in the UK have been rising steeply since the second half of 2021. UK food and non-alcoholic drink prices were 14.8% higher in July 2023 compared to the previous year, based on the CPI measure of inflation.³⁷ This continued the decline from the recent peak of 19.1% in March 2023, which was the highest rate of increase in food prices since 1977 according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS).³⁸



Source: ONS, Food and non-alcoholic drink component of CPI, series [D7G8](#) (16 August 2023 update)

The rise in food prices is due to a combination of supply chain problems, labour shortages and rising costs of preparing and transporting food. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine is also causing an increase in food prices on

³⁷ ONS, [Consumer price inflation, UK: July 2023](#), 16 August 2023, Table 5 and ONS, Food and non-alcoholic drink component of CPI, annual rate of change, series [D7G8](#)

³⁸ ONS estimates (ONS, [Consumer price inflation, UK: May 2023](#), 21 June 2023) based on ONS extended historical inflation series ([Consumer price inflation, historical estimates and recent trends, UK: 1950 to 2022](#), May 2022)

international markets, as Russia and Ukraine are important producers of agricultural products like wheat.³⁹

In its early August 2023 assessment of the UK economy, the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) said that its industry contacts expect food price inflation to fall to "around or a little below 10%" by the end of 2023.⁴⁰ This reflects the moderation in input costs, such as energy prices, but will take some time to fully transmit through the supply chain and be reflected in consumer food prices.

On 16 June 2023, the chief executive of Tesco, the largest supermarket chain in the UK, said that he believed that food price inflation was past its peak and would continue to ease in the second half of 2023.⁴¹ In July, the chief executives of Sainsbury's and Ocado also expressed the view that the peak in food price inflation had already been reached.⁴²

Some food items have higher inflation rates than others

Food inflation varies from item to item. The [ONS's shopping prices comparison tool](#) provides inflation data for a range of shopping items in the UK.

In July 2023 the food items with the highest annual inflation rates were granulated white sugar (54%), olive oil (42%), cook-in sauce (34%), and cucumber (32%).

The food items with the lowest annual inflation rate in July 2023 were kiwis (-4%), blueberries (-2%), spreadable butter (-1%), instant coffee (0%) and honey (0%).⁴³

The ONS has released what it describes as "highly experimental" data on the prices of lowest-cost grocery items, to help estimate inflation levels that the lowest-income households face. This data shows the lowest-priced items have increased by around the same amount as average food and non-alcoholic drinks.⁴⁴ However, households who were already buying the cheapest food do not have the choice that other households have to switch to cheaper products when faced with rising prices.

³⁹ UN FAO Information Note, [The importance of Ukraine and the Russian Federation for global agricultural markets and the risks associated with the current conflict](#) (11 March 2022 update)

⁴⁰ Bank of England, [Monetary Policy Report - August 2023](#), 3 August 2023, p65 and Box D

⁴¹ "[Tesco boss: food inflation has probably peaked but prices will stay high](#)", Guardian, 16 June 2023 and "[Tesco chief sees 'encouraging' signs that inflationary pressures are easing](#)", Financial Times, 16 June 2023

⁴² "[UK 'over the worst' of food price inflation, says Ocado chief](#)", Financial Times, 18 July 2023 and "[Sainsbury's boss says food prices now rising more slowly](#)", BBC News, 4 July 2023

⁴³ ONS, [Shopping prices comparison tool](#) (Accessed 21 August 2023)

⁴⁴ ONS, [Tracking the price of the lowest-cost grocery items, UK, experimental analysis: April 2021 to September 2022](#), 25 October 2022

3.2

The cost of living crisis has increased household food insecurity

People are cutting back on food shopping in response to rising prices

In July and August 2023, 56% of adults in Great Britain reported an increase in their cost of living compared with the month before, according to the ONS. Of these, 97% saw the price of their food shopping go up, and 47% had started spending less on essentials, including food.⁴⁵

Some people are eating less

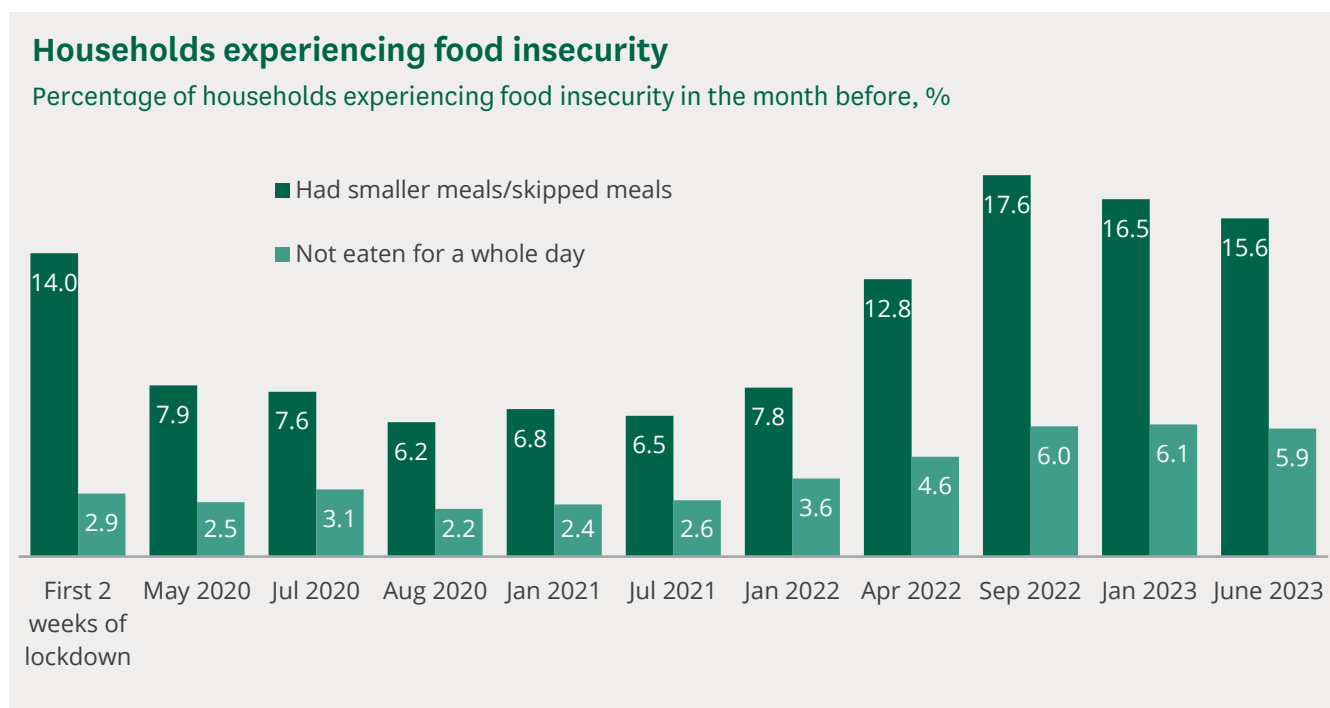
A YouGov survey by the Food Foundation, a food poverty charity, found that in June 2023, 17.0% of households in the UK were 'food insecure' (ate less or went a day without eating because they couldn't access or afford food), up from 8.8% in January 2022 and 7.4% in January 2021.⁴⁶ 15.6% of people reported eating less or skipped meals, 10.9% had not eaten when they were hungry, and 5.9% said they had gone a whole day without eating in the month to January 2023.⁴⁷

As shown in the chart below, household food insecurity has been rising since August 2020, and all three food insecurity categories were higher in January 2023 than in the first two weeks of the coronavirus lockdown in March 2020.

⁴⁵ The data is for 26 July to 6 August 2023, compared to the previous month; ONS, [Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain](#), 11 August 2023

⁴⁶ Note that the food foundation's definition of food insecurity is slightly different to the DWP's definition.

⁴⁷ Food Foundation, [Food insecurity Tracking](#), Round 13, (accessed 21 August 2023)



Source: Food Foundation, [Food insecurity Tracking](#), Round 13

Food bank use has increased

As outlined in section 2.2, [the number of food parcels supplied by Trussell Trust food banks increased by 37% between 2021/22 and 2022/23](#), due to the rise in the cost of living. For the first time, the Trussell Trust provided parcels to over 1 million children. The Trust reported that food banks are helping more and more working people, and food banks have changed their opening hours to facilitate people who work during the day.

More than 760,000 people used a Trussell Trust food bank for the first time in 2022/23, a 38% increase from 2021/22.⁴⁸

Citizens Advice helped 4,620 people with food bank referrals in the week to 5 June 2023, up from 3,941 in the week to 6 June 2022. Food bank referrals peaked in the week to 12 December 2022, when Citizens Advice helped 5,968 people.⁴⁹

The Independent Food Aid Network surveyed its food banks in April 2023 and 89% of respondents said they saw increased need between January and March 2023. Two thirds said they would have to reduce the level of support they provide if demand continues to increase.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Trussell Trust, UK Factsheet, [Emergency food parcel distribution in the UK: April 2022 – March 2023](#)

⁴⁹ Citizens Advice, Cost of living dashboard, [Key COL trends from our data](#), Slide 7 (accessed 21 August 2023)

⁵⁰ Independent Food Aid Network, [IFAN Data, April 2023](#) (accessed 8 June 2023)

3.3

Government response to rising food prices

In response to a [PQ on Government discussions with supermarkets on price increases](#) on 4 May, Defra Minister Mark Spencer responded that it was not for the Government to set retail food prices or comment on commercial decisions:

Defra meets regularly with food retailers and trade associations to discuss a range of issues, including the impact of food inflation. Whilst my Department is taking action to maintain an efficient food supply chain by mitigating against any potential burdens or friction which could otherwise drive-up consumer food prices, we continue to use regular engagement to work with retailers and producers to explore the range of measures they can take to ensure the availability of affordable food. For example, by maintaining value ranges, price matching and price freezing measures. However, it is not for HM Government to set retail food prices nor to comment on day-to-day commercial decisions by companies.⁵¹

On 16 May, the Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs met with representatives from across the UK food supply chain in a [UK Farm to fork summit](#). A policy paper [following the UK Farm to Fork summit](#) was published on 16 May. [Karen Betts, Chief Executive of the Food and Drink Federation, stated](#) that “it’s a pity there wasn’t more of a laser focus on immediate issues and the drivers of inflation – while some of these are beyond everyone’s control, many are not. Action to fill labour and skills shortages and to simplify current and upcoming regulation, as well as simplifying post-Brexit labelling changes, would help to drive down prices”. The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has launched an [investigation into competition in the grocery retail market](#). On 15 May, Sarah Cardell, Chief Executive of the CMA, said:

We recognise that global factors are behind many of the grocery price increases, and we have seen no evidence at this stage of specific competition problems. But, given ongoing concerns about high prices, we are stepping up our work in the grocery sector to help ensure competition is working well and people can exercise choice with confidence.⁵²

The CMA’s investigation will be split into two phases:

- First, completing work to assess how competition is working overall in the grocery retail market, drawing on publicly available data and other information.
- Second, in parallel, identifying which product categories, if any, might merit closer examination across the supply chain.⁵³

⁵¹ PQ 183110, [[Food: Prices](#)], 27 April 2023

⁵² Competition and Markets Authority, [CMA update on action to help contain cost of living pressures](#), 15 May 2023

⁵³ Competition and Markets Authority, [CMA update on action to help contain cost of living pressures](#), 15 May 2023

In late May 2023, there were media reports that the Government was discussing a possible voluntary scheme for maximum prices for certain goods with supermarkets.⁵⁴ However, on 1 June the Government reiterated its previous position that while it would continue to engage with industry, it was not the Government's role to intervene in food prices.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ For example, the Telegraph, [Government considering intervention in food prices despite supermarkets row](#), 31 May 2023; and the Guardian, [UK ministers discuss voluntary price limits for basic foods but rule out imposing caps](#), 28 May 2023

⁵⁵ PQ HL7966, [[Food: Prices](#)] 19 May 2023

4 Free school meals in England

In England, free school meals (FSM) are a statutory entitlement available to pupils that meet the eligibility criteria **and** whose parents or carers make an application. Local authorities are responsible for providing free school meals.

The [Education Act 1944](#) made it a duty of all Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to provide school meals for those who wanted them. For a brief period under the post-war Labour Government, the full net cost of school meals was met by the Government. However, this proved costly and LEAs were allowed to charge for meals while still providing some meals free to disadvantaged pupils. The eligibility criteria for free school meals have varied since they were introduced.

Since 2014, all infant school pupils (reception, year 1, and year 2) in state-funded schools are eligible for free school meals.⁵⁶

Additional background information is available in the House of Commons Library briefing paper [School meals and nutritional standards](#).

4.1 Current eligibility criteria

Children's' eligibility for free school meals is based on their parents or carers meeting certain criteria (outlined below) **and** if parents make an application for free school meals.

If a pupil receives FSM in a given school year, they remain eligible until they finish their current phase of education (primary or secondary). This excludes [infant pupils that receive meals under the universal policy](#) (reception, year 1, and year 2).

During the coronavirus outbreak, [eligibility for free school meals was extended](#) to **some** groups of children who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF). In March 2022, the Government announced that this extension would be permanent.⁵⁷

Parents or carers currently meet the eligibility criteria if they receive any of the following:

⁵⁶ House of Commons Library, [School meals and nutritional standards](#), February 2023

⁵⁷ Department for Education, [Providing free school meals to families with no recourse to public funds](#), 9 June 2022; UK Parliament, [Update on Children with no recourse to public funds: Statement UIN HCWS714](#), 24 March 2022

- Income Support
- Income-based Jobseekers Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- the guaranteed element of State Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit (provided they are not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190)
- Working Tax Credit run-on (paid for 4 weeks after a person stops qualifying for Working Tax Credit)
- Universal Credit (from 1 April 2018 **only in cases with household income of less than £7,400 a year**⁵⁸, with [transitional protections](#) for existing claimants)

4.2

Number of pupils known to be eligible

In January 2023, there were around 2.0 million pupils known to be eligible for FSM, representing 23.8% of state funded pupils.⁵⁹ This eligibility rate has increased particularly sharply in the last few years (since 2018) and is the highest rate recorded since the current time series began in 2006.

This increase could be driven by many factors including macro-economic conditions, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the continued effect of [the transitional protections during the rollout of Universal Credit](#).⁶⁰

The chart below shows that eligibility rates in all state-funded schools (including special schools and [alternative provision](#) providers) increased following the 2008 recession then followed a downward trend from 2013. Rates increased again following the Universal Credit (UC) transitional protections from April 2018 and continued to increase throughout and following the Covid-19 pandemic.

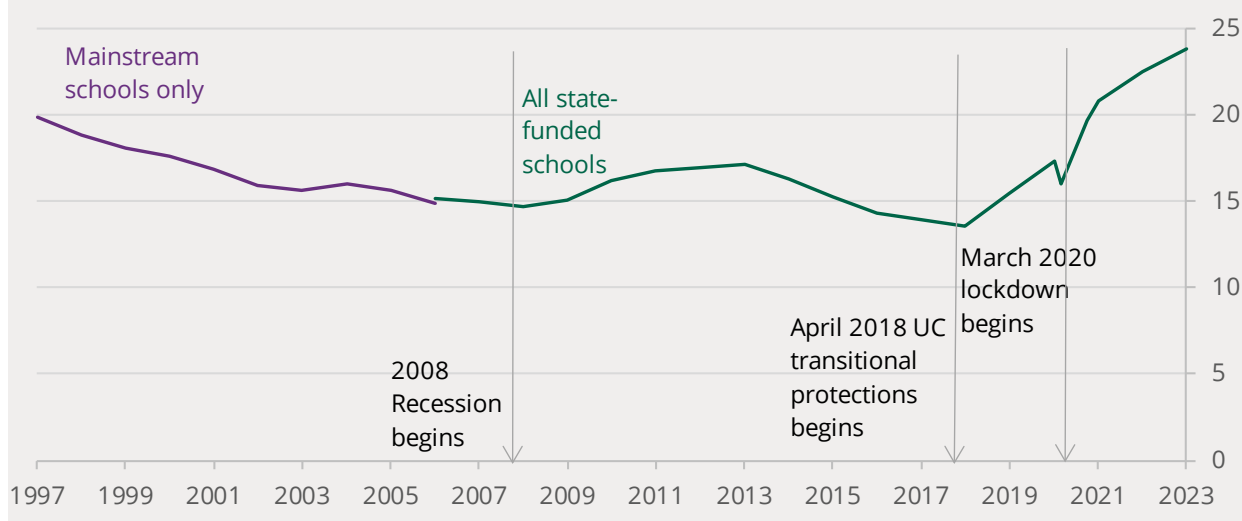
⁵⁸ After tax and not including any benefits

⁵⁹ Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2023](#), 8 June 2023

⁶⁰ Institute for Fiscal Studies, [The policy menu for school lunches: options and trade-offs in expanding free school meals in England](#), 29 March 2023

FSM eligibility rates reached a peak in January 2023

% of pupils known to be eligible for FSM, state-funded schools, England



Notes: The two series are not comparable. Data is as of January each year (excluding 2020 which is as of January and October). Eligibility requirements for underlying benefits have changed over the period. "All state-funded schools" excludes alternative providers from 2006 to 2010. UC: Universal Credit
Sources: Department for Education (DfE), [schools pupils and their characteristics](#): various years; DfE, [Free school meals Autumn term 2020](#).

As in previous years, a higher proportion of state-funded primary school pupils (24.0%) were eligible compared with secondary pupils (22.7%).⁶¹ However, the highest rates by far were in non-mainstream settings (more than half of pupils in [alternative provision schools](#) were eligible).

Pupils know to be eligible for FSM

January 2023, state-funded schools, England

	% eligible	Number eligible (nearest 1,000)
State-funded primary	24.0	1,115,000
State-funded secondary	22.7	823,000
Special schools	46.0	69,000
Alternative Provision schools	57.8	8,000
All schools	23.8	2,020,000

Source: Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#), 8 June 2023

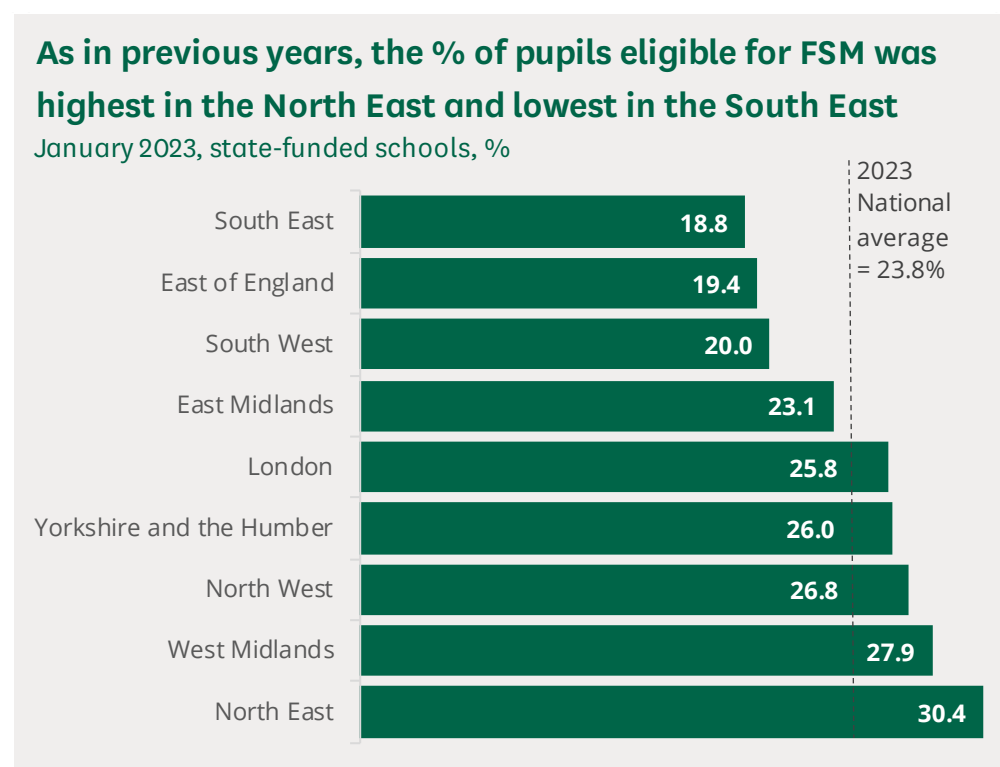
Regional and local variations in pupils eligible for FSM

In January 2023, the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM in England was 23.8%.⁶² However, this is an average and masks considerable regional and local authority variation.

⁶¹ Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#), 8 June 2023

⁶² Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#), 8 June 2023

The North East of England recorded the highest eligibility rate in absolute terms (6.6 percentage points above the national average). The South East region had the lowest rate (5.0 percentage points below the national average).



Source: Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#), 8 June 2023

There is much more variation in eligibility rates between local authorities (in absolute terms) compared to regions. As in previous years, in January 2023, Islington was the local authority with the highest eligibility rate (42.9%), and Isles of Scilly recorded the lowest rate (3.0%).

Local Authorities with the highest and lowest rates of FSM eligibility
January 2023, pupils attending state-funded schools, %

Highest			Lowest		
1	Islington	42.9	1	Isles of Scilly	3.0
2	Manchester	42.7	2	Wokingham	9.5
3	Blackpool	41.4	3	Rutland	11.7
4	Camden	40.9	4	Bracknell Forest	12.5
5	Knowsley	40.3	5	Central Bedfordshire	13.1
6	Hackney	40.3	6	Richmond upon Thames	13.1
7	Middlesbrough	39.9	7	Windsor and Maidenhead	13.1
8	Newcastle upon Tyne	39.6	8	Buckinghamshire	13.7
9	Tower Hamlets	39.2	9	Kingston upon Thames	13.9
10	Birmingham	38.4	10	Surrey	13.9

Source: Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#), 8 June 2023

The proportion of pupils eligible for FSM increased in every local authority between January 2022 and January 2023 (excluding the City of London which has a very small number of school pupils).⁶³

Some areas had larger increases than others. In Westminster, eligibility increased the most in absolute terms (by 2.5 percentage points), the joint second largest increase was recorded in Enfield and Sandwell (2.2 percentage points). While in Hammersmith and Fulham it increased the least (0.4 percentage points). Many of the biggest increases were in areas which had above average eligibility rates.

Ethnicity of pupils eligible for free school meals

The ethnic group with the highest proportion of pupils receiving free school meals in January 2023 was Travellers of Irish Heritage (around 65% of whom were eligible compared to the national average of 24%), followed by Gypsy/Roma pupils (55% were eligible), and White and Black Caribbean pupils (43% were eligible).

Indian and Chinese pupils had the lowest eligibility rates (7% and 8% respectively). White British pupils were broadly in line with the national average (23% of this group were eligible for FSM).⁶⁴

4.3

GCSE attainment

On average, pupils eligible for FSM have lower GCSE attainment than pupils that are not eligible.⁶⁵ There are many measures of GCSE attainment. One measure is the proportion achieving a [“standard pass” in both English and maths GCSE](#) (9-4 grades in both English and Maths GCSE which is roughly equivalent to achieving A*-C under the previous letter grade system).

The difference in attainment between pupils not eligible for FSM and those that are, is known as the “attainment gap”.

In 2022, 47% of pupils eligible for FSM achieved a standard pass in both English and Maths GCSE compared to 75% of pupils not eligible.⁶⁶ This was an attainment gap of around 28 percentage points.

The attainment gap in the standard pass rate has remained broadly the same in recent years. However, the size of the attainment gap varies depending on the group of FSM eligible pupils (for example the attainment gap in the

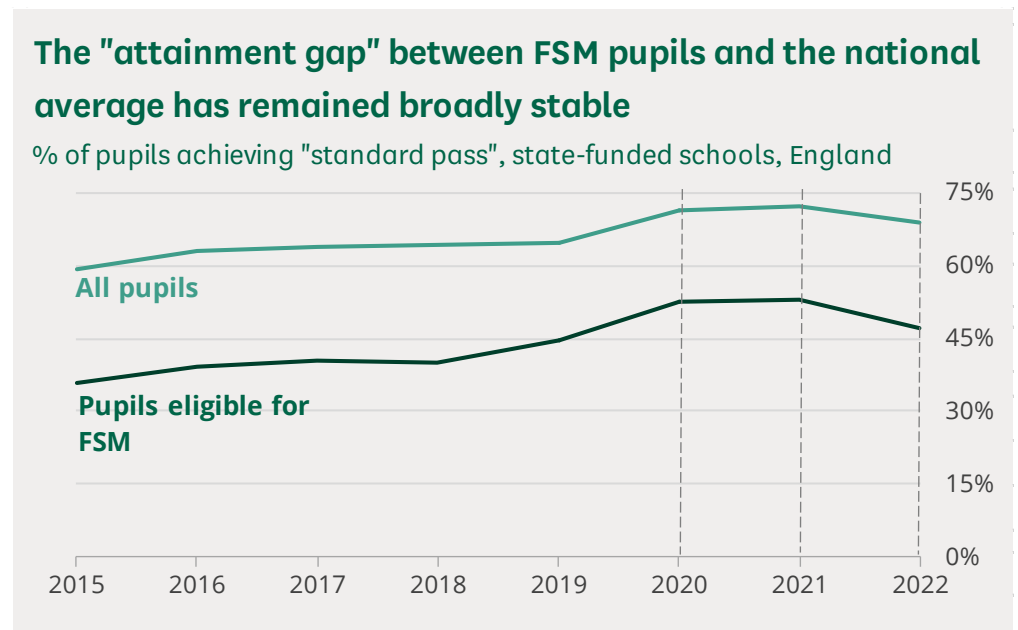
⁶³ Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#), 8 June 2023

⁶⁴ Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#), 8 June 2023

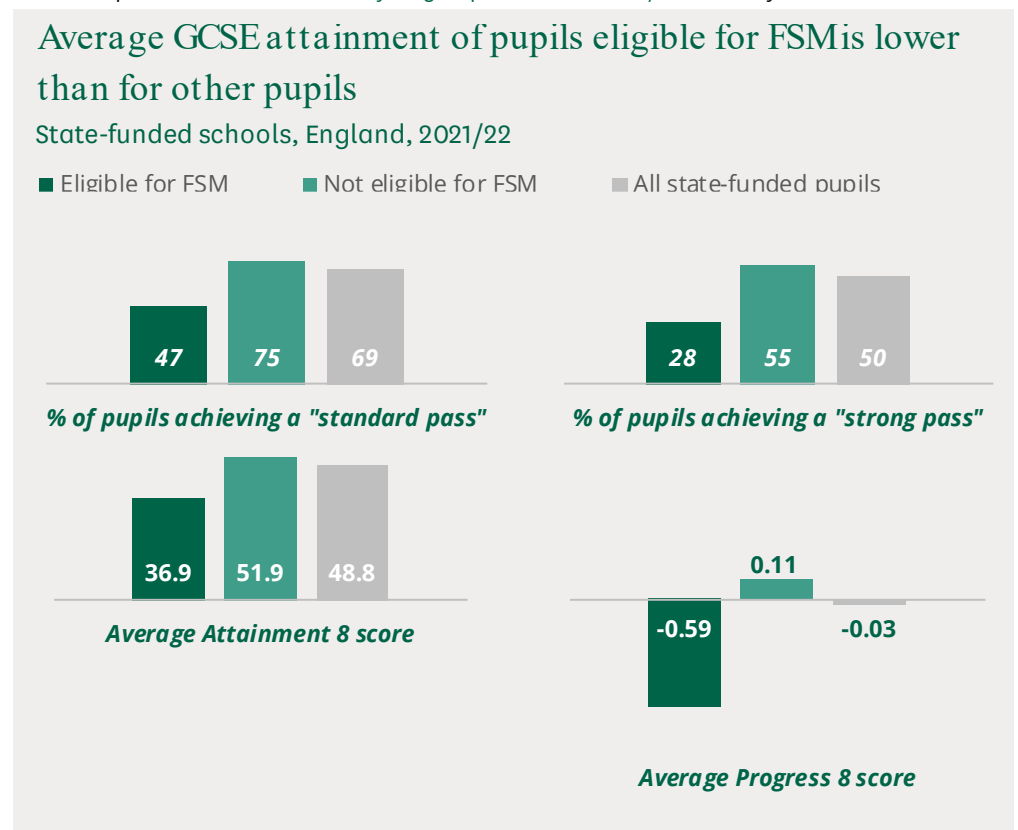
⁶⁵ Department for Education, [Key Stage 4 performance: 2021/22](#), February 2023

⁶⁶ Department for Education, [Key Stage 4 performance: 2021/22](#), February 2023 ([custom table](#) created 19 June 2023)

standard pass rate for FSM eligible pupils attending school in London is much smaller compared to other regions).



Note: A "standard pass" is achieving English and maths GCSE grades 9-4 (roughly comparable to A*-C). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the changes in exams in 2020, 2021, and 2022 caution should be taken when making comparisons over this period, this is illustrated by the breaks in the series. Source: Department for Education, [Key Stage 4 performance: 2021/22](#), February 2023



Notes: A "standard pass" is achieving English and maths GCSE grades 9-4 (roughly comparable to A*-C). A "strong pass" is achieving English and Maths GCSE grades 9-5. [Attainment 8](#) is an average score based on pupil's best eight grades in a group of GCSEs. [Progress 8](#) is the average progress that pupils make from the end of primary school to the end of year 11. Source: DfE, [Key Stage 4 performance: 2021/22](#), February 2023 ([custom table](#) created 19 June 2023)

Pupils eligible for FSM attending school in London had much higher attainment than the other regions (60% achieved a standard pass compared to 47% across all FSM pupils). In addition, the gap between FSM eligible and non-FSM eligible pupils in London was the smallest by far (around 19 percentage points compared to the national average of 28 percentage points).⁶⁷

The West Midlands showed lower performance than London but had the second highest attainment of pupils receiving FSM and the second smallest attainment gap (58% achieving a standard pass and an attainment gap of 25 percentage points).

The attainment of pupils eligible for FSM was lowest for pupils attending schools in the South East and the attainment gap was also the largest (42% achieving a standard pass and an attainment gap of 34 percentage points).⁶⁸

There was high variation in the attainment of FSM eligible pupils based on their ethnic group. In 2022, pupils of Chinese ethnicity receiving FSM had much higher attainment than other major ethnic groups. The proportion of pupils of Chinese ethnicity eligible for FSM achieving a standard pass was 82%. Followed by pupils of Asian ethnicity (65% achieved a standard pass).⁶⁹

The attainment of FSM eligible pupils of White ethnicity was lower than any other major ethnic group (41% achieved a standard pass), and the gap between FSM eligible and non-FSM eligible pupils of White ethnicity was the largest by far (33 percentage points).

As in previous years, female pupils eligible for FSM achieved higher attainment than eligible boys (50% achieved a standard pass compared with 44% of boys). The attainment gap between girls receiving FSM and those not, was also slightly smaller than for boys (27 percentage points compared to 28 percentage points).⁷⁰

4.4 Free school meals funding

Funding for free school meals has not been ring-fenced since 2011. Funding is available to schools through the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), and through the Universal Infant Free School Meal Grant for pupils in years reception to year two. The Department for Education publishes DSG allocations on an

⁶⁷ Department for Education, [Key Stage 4 performance: 2020/21](#), February 2022 ([custom table](#) created 19 June 2023)

⁶⁸ Department for Education, [Key Stage 4 performance: 2020/21](#), February 2022 ([custom table](#) created 19 June 2023)

⁶⁹ Department for Education, [Key Stage 4 performance: 2020/21](#), February 2022 ([custom table](#) created 19 June 2023)

⁷⁰ Department for Education, [Key Stage 4 performance: 2020/21](#), February 2022 ([custom table](#) created 19 June 2023)

annual basis, but breakdowns of certain items (such as FSM) are not published. This means it is not possible to identify the amount of funding allocated for free school meals.

However, it is possible to create a **rough estimate**.

The National Funding Formula (NFF) FSM factor value for financial year 2023-24 is £480 per pupil (£470 in 2022-23).⁷¹

[NFF allocations are operating in an “indirect” format](#) where the allocations are notional. Local authorities can adjust these notional allocations according to local formula, this means the NFF allocations may not be what schools receive. In addition, as outlined above this funding is not ring fenced and so schools may choose to spend different amounts on free school meals.

In January 2023 there were around 2.0 million pupils known to be eligible for free school meals.⁷² On this basis, and using the £480 figure above, the cost of providing free school meals in 2022-23 can be estimated at around £1 billion.

You can find more information about the NFF in the House of Commons Library briefing [School Funding in England](#).

⁷¹ Department for Education, [National funding formula for schools and high needs, 2023 to 2024](#), updated 19 July 2022

⁷² Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#), 8 June 2023

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