



June 2026

ALL AT ONE TABLE

Universal Free School Meals in a Divided Nation

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

**NO CHILD
LEFT BEHIND**



**More in
Common**

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FOREWORD

The impact of Free School Meals for All for children's health and learning should now be well understood by policymakers. But perhaps less often understood are the wider impacts. We see all the time, the cynicism that sets in for voters who never believe means-tested policies could be for their family.

At best, this breeds mistrust and disengagement, and at its worst, it's exploited by politicians who would seek to divide us. Black vs white, immigrant vs native-born, worker vs welfare recipient.

The solution is simple and there's not a child in this country who doesn't instinctively know the right answer. Every child needs to eat. Hungry children can't think straight and they certainly can't learn.

Schools are formative places in our communities. And lunch sits at the centre of every school day as an invitation. We can start to build the society we want right there. A country where every child eats.

In a society where we don't have to scrap and fight to eat, we can start to imagine an order which is just and fair, diverse and open.

Children tell us the canteen is a place where differences in circumstances are all too obvious. For some this can lead to feelings of shame and isolation – feelings

which can last long into adulthood. Universalism takes a moment that can induce stigma or division and turns it into ritual which unites and strengthens communities.

There are those on the far-right who seek to use every opportunity to divide us. We don't have to give in to that.

With the much anticipated extension of Free School Meals to over 500,000 more children set for September 2026, now is not the time to hold back. We must use this moment to be bold, to step up, and ensure no child is left behind.

In these pages, you will find that Free School Meals for All is a policy that can meet this moment and help unite our divided society – a change that is good for children, good for families and good for the country.

Daniel Kebede



Daniel Kebede
General Secretary,
National Education
Union

INTRODUCING THE SEVEN SEGMENTS OF BRITAIN

This research uses More in Common's segmentation of the British public. Based on extended research into Britons' core beliefs, their values and behaviours, this segmentation allows us to look upstream not just at what different groups think, but why they think it. Going beyond a simple left-right spectrum, it reflects deeper differences in how people relate to authority, change, community and the future, which help explain why traditional party loyalties have weakened and political volatility has increased.

Segmentation is a particularly powerful way of detecting and understanding differences and commonality in people's values and in their broader orientation towards society and the big issues facing the country.

The analysis produces seven segments within the British population:



Progressive Activists 12 per cent of the population

A highly engaged and globally-minded group driven by concerns about social justice. Politically active but feeling increasingly alienated from mainstream party politics, they prioritise issues such as climate change and international affairs. Occasionally outliers on social issues, they maintain a strongly held and sometimes uncompromising approach to their beliefs.



Incrementalist Left 21 per cent of the population

A civic-minded, community-oriented group holding views which are generally left-of- centre but with an aversion to the extreme; they prefer gradual reform over revolutionary change. They trust experts and institutions yet are largely tuned out of day-to-day politics and can be conflict-averse, stepping away from issues they see as particularly fraught or complex.



Established Liberals

9 per cent of the population

A prosperous, confident segment who believe the system broadly works as it is and who trust experts to deliver continued progress. They have a strong belief in individual agency which can make them less empathetic to those who are struggling. Institutionally trusting, they maintain faith in democratic processes and have a strong information-centric way of engaging with issues.



Sceptical Scrollers

10 per cent of the population

A digitally-native group whose unhappiness with the social contract means they have lost faith in traditional institutions and seek alternative sources of truth online. Often shaped by their experience of the Covid pandemic, they prefer individual influencers over mainstream media and are increasingly drawn to conspiratorial thinking.



Rooted Patriots

20 per cent of the population

A patriotic but politically untethered group which feels abandoned and overlooked by political elites and yearns for leaders with common sense, but does not want to overthrow the system as a whole. They are particularly concerned about community decline and the pressures of migration. Interventionist on economics but conservative on social issues, they have shaped much of Britain's politics over the past decade.



Traditional Conservatives

8 per cent of the population

Respectful of authority and tradition, Traditional Conservatives believe in individual responsibility and established norms that have served them well. Nostalgic for the past but optimistic about the future, they are deeply sceptical of many forces of change such as immigration or the path to net-zero.



Dissenting Disruptors

20 per cent of the population

Frustrated with their circumstances with an appetite for radical solutions, Dissenting Disruptors crave dramatic change and strong leadership. Highly distrustful of institutions, opposed to multiculturalism and feeling disconnected from society, they are drawn to political movements that promise to overhaul the status quo and put people like them first.



PUBLIC MOOD IN BRITAIN: THE CONTEXT OF UNIVERSAL FREE SCHOOL MEALS

Public attitudes to any policy proposal are always shaped by the wider political context, and universal free school meals is no exception. Since Labour swept to a landslide victory in 2024, public mood has turned against the government, and the populist left and right have benefited. This section offers an overview of the trends underlying this, before specifically considering attitudes to universal free school meals.

Off the back of a landslide Labour victory in July 2024, much of the electorate does not feel that the party has delivered on the change that was promised. Two-thirds of Britons (67 per cent) say that this Labour government feels like ‘more of the same’ when compared to the previous Conservative government, rather than something genuinely different.

This demand for change comes at a time when, for so many Britons, the challenges we face as a society feel not only pressing, but existential. The cost of living has now been consistently ranked the number one issue facing the country for years, and now by 69 per cent of Britons. More than half feel as though the cost of living crisis may never end. At the same time, issues such as immigration, housing and support for the NHS remain consistently high in public consciousness.



Reagan

Youth Worker,
Sheffield, Labour
to Green switcher

It's dire at times. I think what they seem to have said is that they've managed to create a long-term plan, but a long-term plan is not what people really care about. They want things to be happening now.

‘This research looks into universal free school meals, the policy’s potential to unite disparate groups of voters and the values which underlie the policy’s broad support.’

In this context, it is unsurprising that the insurgent parties – the Greens and Reform – perform much better with members of the public who say they are struggling financially. Reform is taking half of the votes among those who say they struggle to make ends meet, while the Green Party is securing 19 per cent of the vote within this group. However, the established parties of Labour and the Conservatives perform better with those who say they are financially comfortable.

As the economy is stalling, among some Britons there’s the sense that the social contract is broken. For many people who have worked hard for the majority of their adult life, it feels as though they’re not in the position they’d hoped or expected. They’ve exchanged years or decades of their life with the expectation of financial comfort, and don’t believe those running the ‘system’ have kept their side of the bargain.

“

Magda

Property Manager,
Labour to Liberal
Democrat switcher

I mean, in my role in the industry that I’m in, I’ve been in over 20 years and it doesn’t get easier (...) I seem to feel I have to work harder to achieve the financial side of what I’m aiming for and struggling with the work-life balance. It’s a lot harder. And yeah, I thought as I got older, it would become a bit easier, but it seems to be the opposite.

“

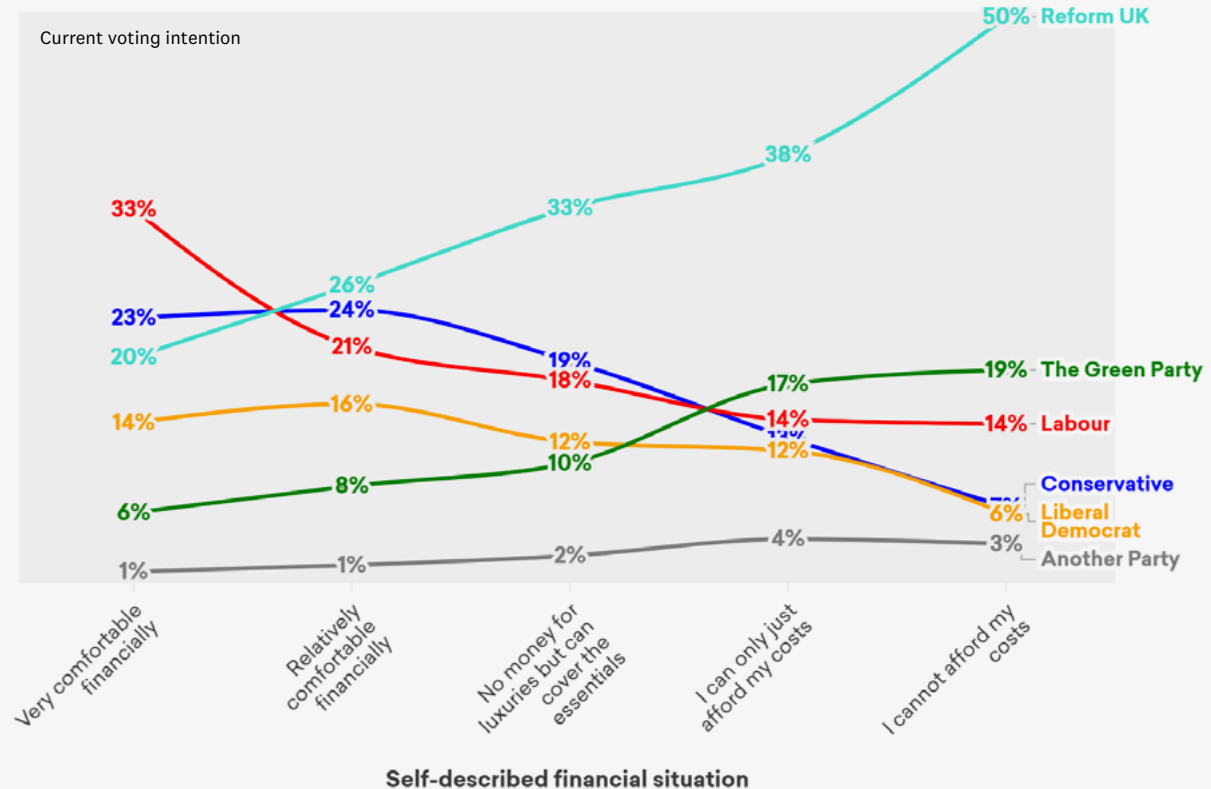
Denzel

Engineering manager,
Birmingham,
considering Reform

The working class is the class that’s getting hit the hardest (...) the actual people that are working, paying their taxes, paying their national insurance and paying for the country to keep running, you are getting the brunt of it, but you’re carrying the country, so how does that work? Whereas the working class benefits, there is nothing for us. They just keep like, ‘Yeah, you’re working, you pay your taxes, you pay this, you pay that, and yeah, we won’t look after you at all...’

Reform and the Greens lead among those who are struggling to make ends meet

We asked: “How well off would you say you feel?”



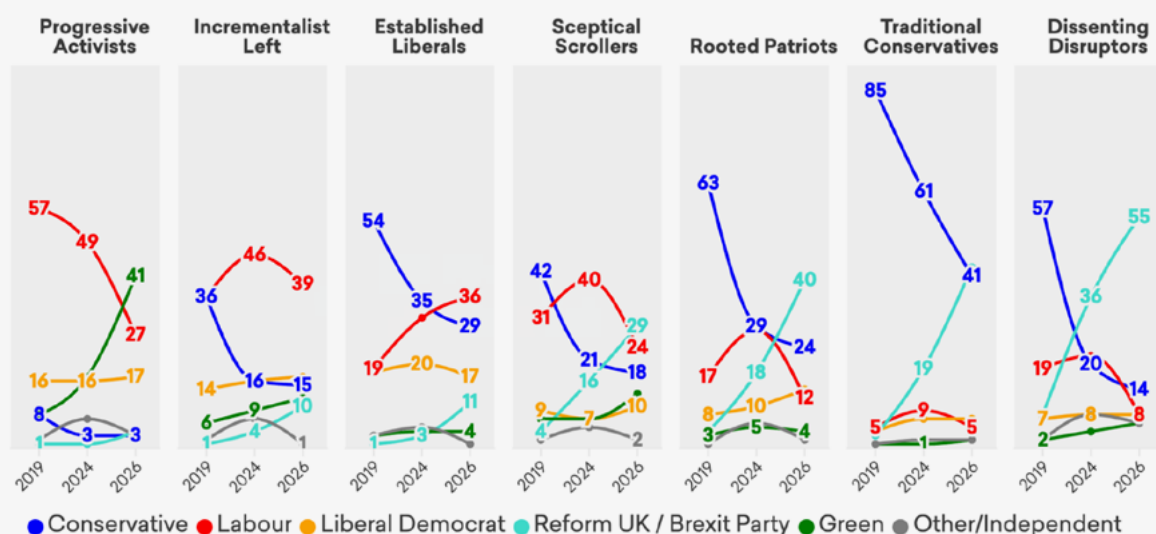
More in Common • January 2026

The May 2026 local elections saw Reform eat into Labour’s support in the ‘red wall’ towns and coastal communities, and the Greens take a large portion of their urban support, meaning that Labour lost over 1,400 councillors around the country, a historic collapse.

While Labour managed to mobilise a broad coalition to win the 2024 General Election, they have since lost much of this support. External pressures of the cost of living crisis, and fear of a more chaotic world, alongside an internal dissatisfaction with the party and mishandling of key policy announcements, have driven voters away from Labour and towards insurgent parties.

Looking through the lens of the More in Common Seven Segments of Britain, Labour’s 2024 General Election victory was made possible through the wide but shallow coalition of five of the Seven Segments. Labour amassed at least 30 per cent of the vote from the Rooted Patriots, Sceptical Scrollers,

Voting habits of the seven segments over time



More in Common • May and June 2026
2019 and 2024 is recalled General Election vote

Established Liberals, Incrementalist Left and Progressive Activists. In 2026, however, they have only maintained support among the Established Liberal segment.

At this time, with high levels of dissatisfaction with the status quo and the government, Reform and the populist-right have seen heightened levels of support. Reform UK have now been ahead in the polls for over 12 months, currently taking around 30 per cent of the vote. Were an election held tomorrow, this would likely put them in power.

The question then for Labour is: what can reconnect the party in power with the voter coalition that got them there? How can the government appear to help working people, and begin to stitch back together the broken social contract? The government needs to show that they are both sympathetic to the struggles and issues facing Britons, but also able to bring about some sort of change to address them.

This research looks into universal free school meals, the policy's potential to unite disparate groups of voters and the values which underlie the policy's broad support. For this research, specific attention was paid to the Labour loyalists, and right-leaning voters, due to high levels of existing support among progressives.



2

PUBLIC OPINION ON UNIVERSAL FREE SCHOOL MEALS

This research examines public attitudes towards the idea of extending free school meals to all primary school children across England, and potentially secondary school children as well. The views of English people were explored in focus groups across Yorkshire, the Southwest of England, the Northwest of England and the Midlands, as well as nationally-representative polling of adults in England.

2.1

The top issues facing children in England

There is wide public concern surrounding child poverty in England. Following social media use, it was the second most selected issue that English people believe children in the country currently face, chosen by almost one third (29 per cent) of the public. Of course, when the cost of living crisis is the top issue for the majority of those living in England, downstream from that comes a concern for children living in poverty as a result.

This concern transcends financial status or parenthood and is shared across supporters of all parties. Over a quarter of those who are financially comfortable (27 per cent) rank child poverty among their top concerns for children, a similar proportion (29 per cent) of those who are the least comfortable financially said the same. Similarly, 28 per cent of parents in England placed child poverty among their top concerns, just one point difference from those without children (29 per cent).

This highlights how concern in this area extends beyond those who it directly affects – child poverty resonates across the electorate. Parents we spoke to mentioned the difficulties of balancing the books and making sure they could offer their children the lifestyles they feel they deserve.

“

Justin, 30

IT worker, Labour
Loyalist, Northwest
England

Well, we've got busy lives trying to support our family and just trying to live ourselves. We're seeing it in the pocket a lot more, especially over the past couple of months. And what I mentioned before, how no one knows what's going on.

Others discussed their concerns about growing wealth inequality in the UK.

“

Danielle, 37

Case worker,
Labour loyalist,
Northwest England

I worry for my daughter because even just having kids and stuff and having to pay for childcare and you're working all the hours that God sends really just to make sure that you're giving your kids the best life that you can. And then you've got the cost of living and everything to contend with (...) I don't think it's equal at all.

But much of this concern isn't just for the current circumstances the children may be living in, instead to many it extends beyond into bleak economic outlooks for their future.



In conversation, many express concerns about the rapid, and often worrying changes that are likely to come about with AI and what that could mean for the employment and therefore financial circumstances of the next generation.

“

Damian, 63

Semi-retired,
Reform voter,
Southeast England

It's the Bank of Mum and Dad is the society today. The people that have mortgages, they're still paying them off. Their children are living at home later into their 20s and 30s in some cases where the child hasn't got the income, hasn't got the deposit to move on. The parents can't fledge the nest to say the children are stuck at home because of the outlook because of the opportunities.

“

Julie, 66

Retired, Liberal
Democrat voter,
Yorkshire

Well, I think the impact that AI is going to have on a lot of office related jobs and also there just doesn't seem to be the same opportunities that for the younger generation (...) there seemed to be more jobs available, but I just worry now that there's not the same opportunities there.

“

Helena, 44

Financial services,
Reform voter,
Southeast England

It's a bit worrying for me, the influence of AI, what jobs are going to be left by the time my children are going into the job market? I think that there will be less and less for them.

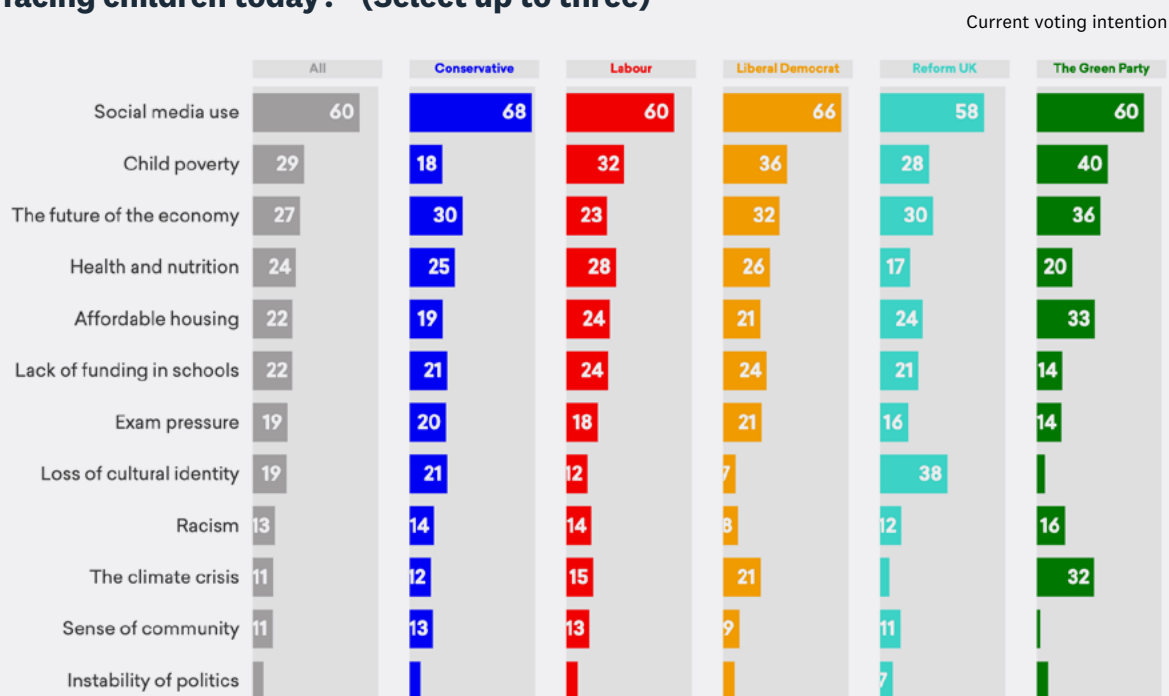
Across generations, and with either direct or indirect contact, there is concern among members of the public for the economy and job market that young people today are entering.

By and large, the top issues facing children for supporters of all parties are relatively similar. There are some notable exceptions: Reform UK supporters are more likely to cite loss of culture and identity as a top issue (38 per cent) while Green Party supporters place greater concern on the climate crisis (32 per cent).

In contrast, asking the same people in England the most important issues facing the country generally, there is less agreement across party lines. Aside from the cost of living, the prioritisation of different issues varies. For example, Reform voters' level of concern for channel crossings and immigration levels is not matched by any other party. Liberal Democrats, Labour and Conservative supporters are more concerned than average by the conflict in the Middle East, while supporters of the Green Party are more likely to prioritise the climate and housing crisis.

Following social media use, people living in England say child poverty is the top issue children face

We asked: “What do you think are the top issues facing children today?” (Select up to three)



Yet these findings reveal, despite a fragmenting political landscape, there is common ground on some of the issues facing children. From the perspective of public opinion, the extension of free school meals to all primary school children in England could present a potentially effective way for the government to deliver a change that addresses cost of living issues prioritised by so many of those living in the country.

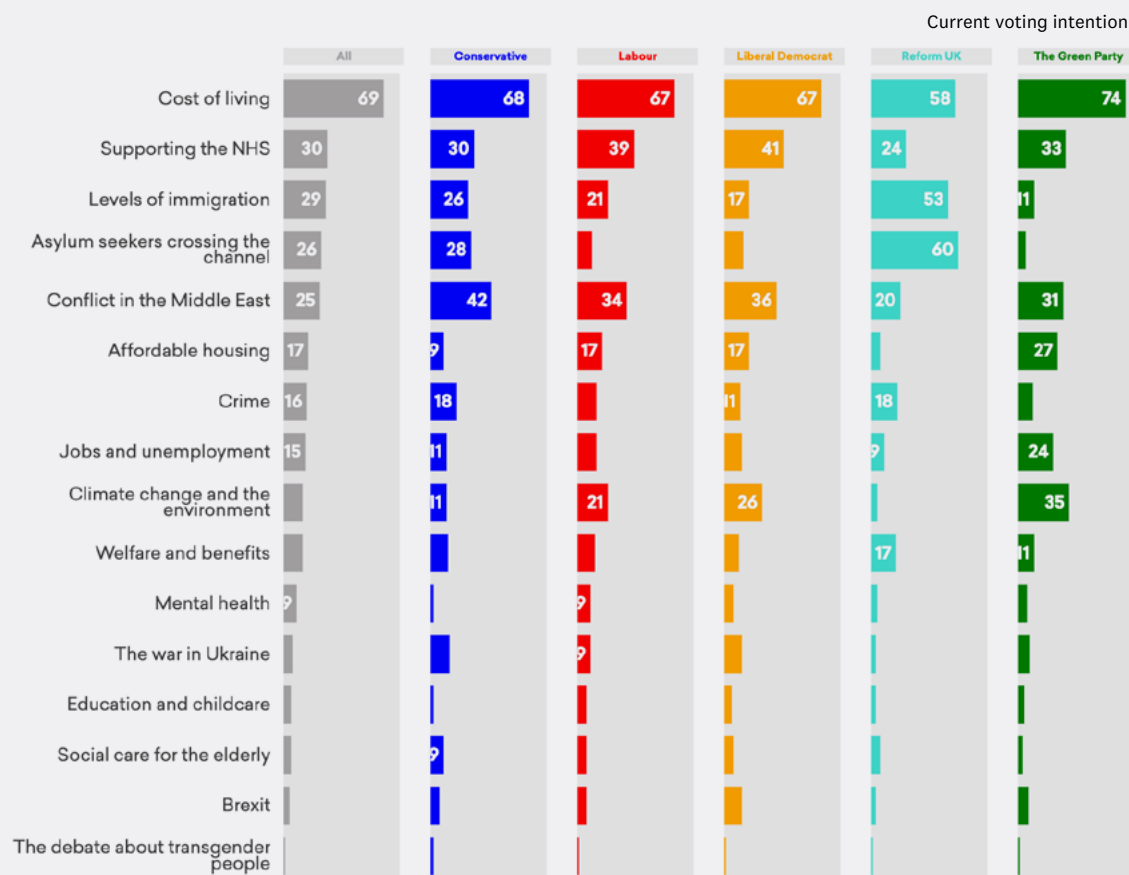
2.2

Universal Free School Meals

Support for the extension of free school meals to all primary school aged children in England is widespread. Two thirds (65 per cent) of those living in England support the policy, including 40 per cent who strongly support it. Just 15 per cent oppose, of which just 7 per cent oppose strongly.

The extension of free school meals to all primary school children is similarly supported by those worried about the cost of living crisis and not. Among

We asked: “In your opinion, which are the most important issues facing the country today?” (Select up to three)

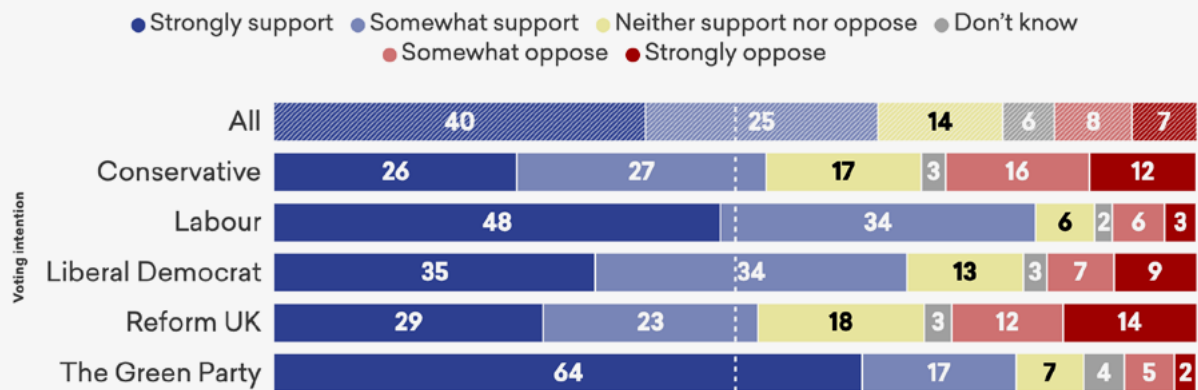


those who cited the cost of living as one of the top most important issues facing the country, over two thirds (69 per cent) are in favour of the policy. Similarly, 59 per cent of those who did not include the cost of living in their concerns support the policy – a difference of just 10 points.

Support transcends traditional Left and Right political divides. At least half of supporters across the five main political parties in the UK support the policy. Support is greatest among supporters of The Labour Party (83 per cent) closely followed by supporters of The Green Party (80 per cent). While opposition increases among right-leaning voters, support remains substantial – among those intending to vote Conservative or Reform UK, a majority (53 and 52 per cent respectively) still back universal free school meals.

Majorities across all main party voter bases support extending free school meals

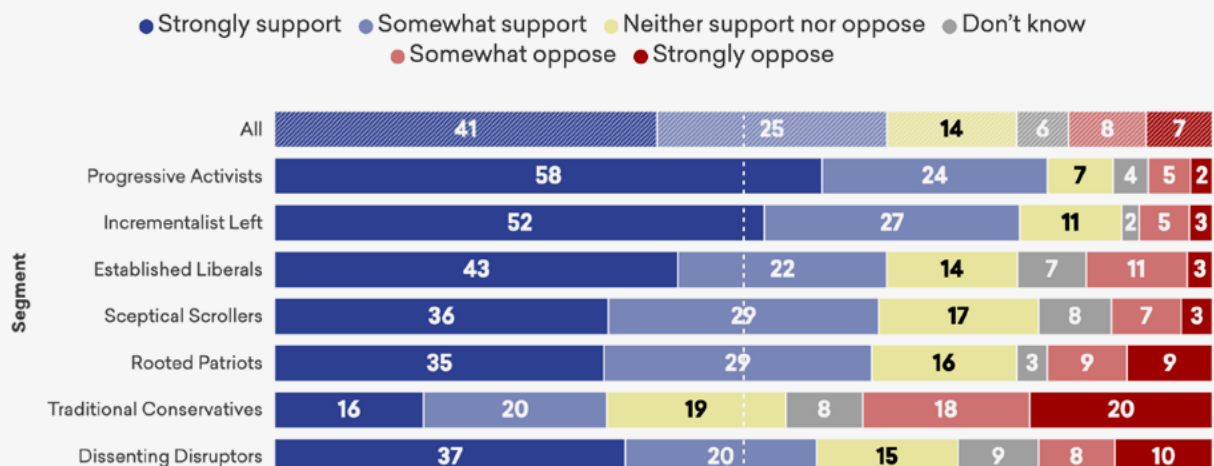
We asked: “To what extent do you support or oppose extending free school meals to all primary school aged children (4-11) in England?”



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In England, support for extending free school meals reaches across six of the seven segments

We asked: “To what extent do you support or oppose extending free school meals to all primary school aged children (4-11) in England?”



More in Common • June 2026

‘Universal free school meals therefore represents an opportunity for a Labour government to make bridges between their fragmented 2024 coalition, winning back those who have strayed, while keeping core supporters onside.’

The lens of the seven segments of Britain showcases the breadth and depth of support across worldviews. The segmentation reflects differences in values and beliefs yet backing for the policy is broadly shared: across six of the seven segments, at least six in ten are in favour of an extension.

For Traditional Conservatives, the only segment where support falls below the majority, those in favour (34 per cent slightly falls behind those opposed (38 per cent).

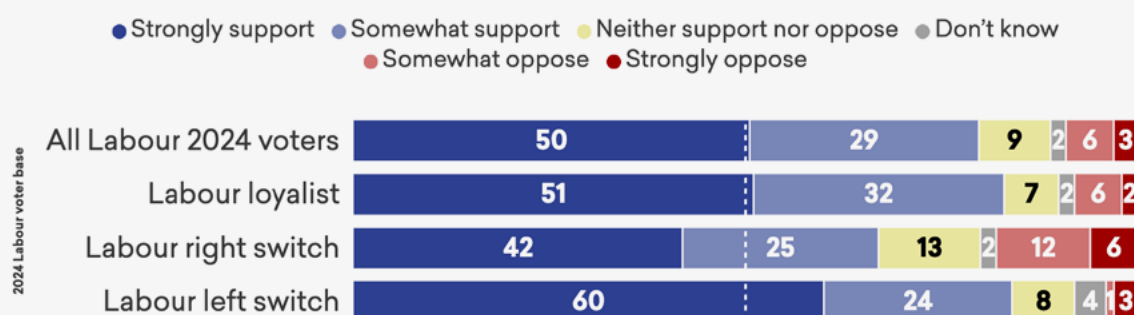
Dissenting Disruptors, the segment most backing Reform, strongly support the policy. Less than one fifth oppose (19 per cent), the vast majority (58 per cent) support. While they support Reform, this group is often receptive towards economically progressive policies such as wealth taxes.

In addition to spanning party lines and the seven segments of Britain, support for the policy is a point of common ground across Labour's – now fragmented – 2024 coalition: those who voted Labour in 2024 and have since stayed with the party (Labour loyalists), moved to parties to the left of Labour (left switchers), or shifted toward parties to their right (right switchers). Across all three groups, support for universal free school meals significantly outweighs opposition.

Universal free school meals is a unifying policy that resonates equally strongly with each of the strands of Labour's previous voter coalition, those who have remained with the party and those who have since moved away. Universal free school meals therefore represents an opportunity for a Labour government to make bridges between their fragmented 2024 coalition, winning back those who have strayed, while keeping core supporters onside.

Support for the extension of free school meals unites Labour's 2024 voters

We asked: “To what extent do you support or oppose extending free school meals to all primary school aged children (4-11) in England?”



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In addition to widespread support for the policy, supporters across voter bases share many of the same reasons for backing it. When asked why it is important for children to have access to free school meals, tackling child poverty (37 per cent) and easing financial pressure on families (33 per cent) were the two most commonly selected responses among those living in England, joint with the belief that all children should be treated equally (33 per cent).

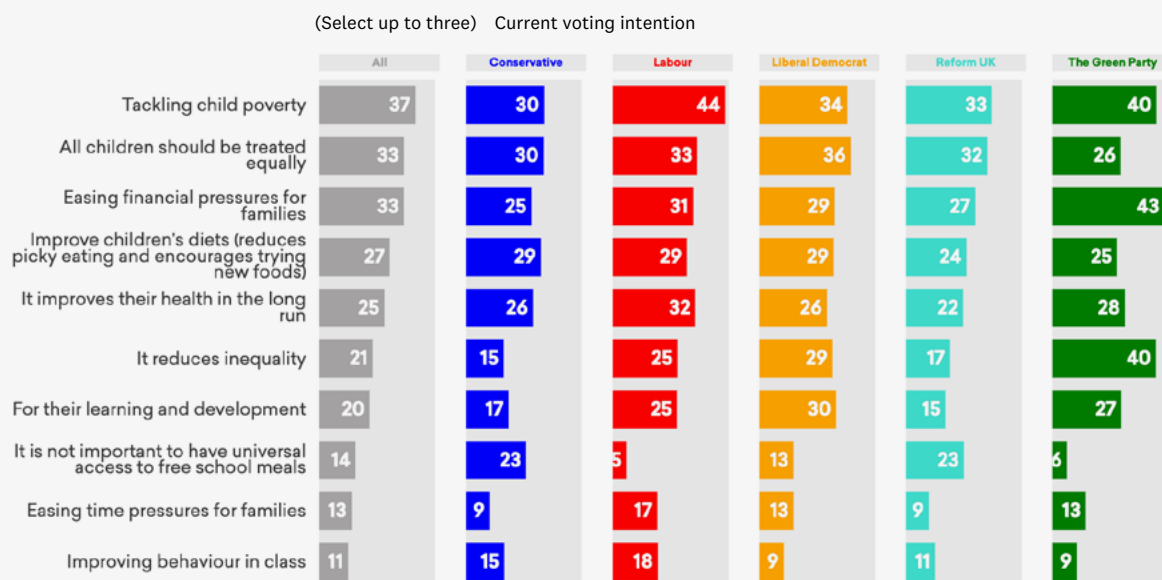
These benefits of universal free school meal provision widely resonate across the political spectrum: tackling child poverty was most commonly selected by both Conservative (31 per cent), Labour (43 per cent) and Reform UK supporters (33 per cent), providing another example of how universal free school meals unifies voters from both mainstream and insurgent parties.

For current Labour supporters, tackling child poverty presents the main desirable outcome from free school meals, selected by 43 per cent of their support base – 9 points ahead of treating all children equally (34 per cent).

For supporters of Reform UK, the most important reasons are in line with the average responses across Britain – an almost equal share between treating all children equally (31 per cent) and child poverty (33 per cent). Across the country, very few think free school meal access is not important, selected by just 14 per cent across those living in England.

Free school meal provision to tackle child poverty resonates across party lines

We asked: “Why, if at all, do you think it is important for children to have access to free school meals?”



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Parents show overwhelming support: over eight in ten (82 per cent) parents to children under the age of 18 support universal free school meals to all primary school children in England, over 6 in 10 (62 per cent) support strongly, just 7 per cent oppose.

“

Siobhan, 34

Environmental
Health Officer,
Labour to Reform

My son's in year two now and I'm dreading that when he goes into year three, to year six, then I'm going to have to pay for free school meals or send them in with packed lunches (...) So I would love to see it.

Support is not exclusive to those with children, however. Among those without children – who would not directly benefit from any cost saving – just 16 per cent oppose the policy, while a clear majority (63 per cent) are in favour.

‘Support is not exclusive to those with children, however. Among those without children – who would not directly benefit from any cost saving – just 16 per cent oppose the policy, while a clear majority (63 per cent) are in favour.’

In addition to support across party lines and parental status, support for the policy spreads across all levels of financial comfort. It is strongest among those struggling the most financially in England: three quarters (74 per cent) of those who cannot or can only just afford their costs support the policy, while just 9 per cent oppose.

Yet, even among those who describe themselves as very comfortable financially, and who stand to gain least from a policy aimed at easing household costs, opposition remains minimal. Just 15 per cent oppose, in line with the national average, while two thirds (66 per cent) are in favour.

Focus groups held with parents and grandparents across the country underscored the depth of support for a universal free school meals policy. For many, the policy felt non-negotiable given the breadth of areas it could benefit. Unprompted, participants recognised that the advantages of universal free school meal access extended well beyond the meal itself. Nicola, a mother from the Midlands, spoke about how the policy would ease the pressures of parenthood in ways that go beyond simple monetary gain.

“

Nicola, 29

Estate Agent, Labour
to Reform, Midlands

It would help me. I mean, it's not necessarily like money. Sometimes it could be money, but even just time, time to make it, it's hard. If you've got a full-time job, you have to make the food, you have to go drop them to school, get to work. It's hard.

For others, such as Elaine, a Labour supporter, the assurance the policy provides that all children will at least have one meal a day fuels her support. For many, free school meals provision is seen as a worthy investment into children's development and futures – positively impacting concentration and overall performance.

“

Elaine, 53

Business partner,
Labour loyalist,
Northwest England

If you know that children have had at least one meal a day regardless of what circumstances they're going home to, whether it's they're still going home to a healthy tea or the parents are working and they're not getting the tea till eight o'clock, whatever it is, it's helping their concentration in school, helping them concentrate to be able to get to be the best that they can be. And if that's the only meal they get all day, well, that's actually the biggest win. But if it's just helping them perform better, that to me is still a big win.

Indeed, the benefits of free school meals are intuitive to many of those living in England. **In focus groups, some noted that unlike other policies intended to help children and parents, it is clear exactly what you're getting with this policy – without worrying about practicalities or logistics.**



‘In focus groups, some noted that unlike other policies intended to help children and parents, it is clear exactly what you’re getting with this policy – without worrying about practicalities or logistics.’

“

Helena, 44

Financial services,
Southeast England,
Reform voter

For me, I used to live in London, all the children there did get free school dinners like the other lady was saying. I don't understand this breakfast club initiative that's been brought out and I think people might have been more on board with it if it was free school dinners instead of breakfast clubs because the way the government have fed it out to people at first it was to reduce poverty and saying that no, the children are going to school hungry and then now they're sort of making it into 30 minutes free childcare. So I'm not really sure where they're sitting with this.

This simplicity and clarity makes universal free school meals an attractive proposition.

2.3

Potential opposition to Universal Free School Meals

When prompted with possible counter arguments against the policy, the idea that not every child needs free school meals was the most popular reason against their provision. A third (32 per cent) of the public selected this.

“

Jay, 56

Taxi Driver,
Labour to Reform,
Northwest England

I do agree with that, but there's plenty of working class people who become well off and can afford to feed their kids at school. Why should they get it for free? There's plenty of people out there with loads of money and they'd love to get free meals for the kids, even though they don't deserve it. I think it should be means-tested personally.

“

Damian, 63

Semi-retired,
Reform voter,
Southeast England

It's only them that need it. So that's where I keep saying it needs to be means-tested. Just can't throw it all into one fits all.

In focus groups, some raised the prospect of means-testing the policy. However, natural counters were raised by other participants, including from current supporters of both Labour and Reform. A key concern with means-tested policy is the underlying notion that schools should be an environment of equal access and opportunity for all children, regardless of their parents' income. The value in allowing the choice of a free school meal also emerged during discussions, the option to opt-in but equally opt-out of the policy mobilises support.

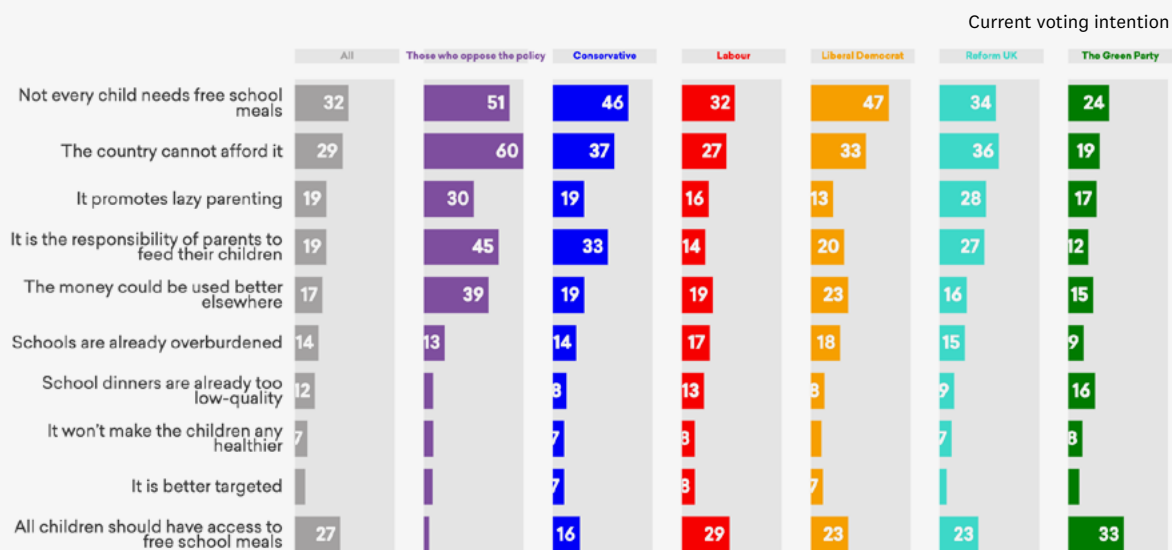
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Maria, 65

Clerical Worker,
Labour to Reform

Or even just offer it to them, isn't it? That doesn't mean they have to take it (...) But no, I do think everyone should be equal. Everybody, all kids should feel the same, have the same.

We asked: “Why, if at all, would you oppose the extension of free school meals to every child in England?” (Select up to three)



“

Brenda, 67

Retired, Labour

But it's optional then whether you want to eat it. It's just having that choice to do that.

The cost of extending free school meals to all primary school children in England is another area of concern with the policy. Three in ten (29 per cent) say the country cannot afford it and that this would contribute to their opposition. Additionally this is also the principal reason fueling opposition, selected by 59 per cent of those not in favour of the policy.

In focus groups, participants shared concerns around feasibility and affordability of universal free school meals, given the squeezed nature of public finances. That being said, even opposition in this area was often caveated with a broad support for the policy in principle. For Adam, a Reform supporter from South East England, his backing for the policy, despite cost concerns, is rooted in the importance of supporting children and education above other issues.

“

Adam, 43Police officer,
Reform voter,
Southeast England

It's really difficult. It just feels to me like it's a really good idea and I think it's really important. I'm not convinced we can afford it when we're struggling at the moment to do so many other things in this country. I know our children and their education is important, but I just don't know how we can fund something like this.





However, for Labour loyalists, providing a meal to school children was viewed as a straightforward priority, and more affordable than other issues the UK faces. For Brenda, a Labour voter from Yorkshire. The cost of the policy is seen as a worthy investment into children and their futures – for her, a top priority for government spending.

“

Brenda, 67

Retired, Labour
loyalist, Yorkshire

I think it's the least they could do is give all children at school meals. I don't think that it'd break the bank to be fair.

“

Justin, 30

IT worker, Labour
loyalist, Northwest
England

It's for the kids, it's a good cause in my head it's quite an easy fix in comparison to a lot of things out there.

“

Craig, 37

Taxi Driver, Labour
to Green

I feel like it would cost a lot less to fund the kids' school meals than it would be to build missiles or to fully make sure the NHS is running. So even though people might say they might be more important to them, it's something that should just be done and then what the money that's left over, can they then be fed onto those other things because I don't think it's anywhere near going to cost anywhere near as much.

‘Perhaps most remarkable is that when faced with a list of possible reasons to oppose the policy, over one quarter of people did not find a single reason to oppose it.’

In conversation with more right-wing voters, the concept of cost around the policy frequently then spilled over into more general concerns about the inefficiency of government spending.

“

Justin, 30

IT worker, Labour
loyalist, Northwest
England

I know where I've started losing a little bit of faith in how our government runs things. Having the right money get to the right places where it is intended to go. You've got to have the logistics behind getting this out to the children. And if it's underfunded, it's going to have this knock-on effect and it's a waste of our money at the end of the day.

“

Iain, 45

Police officer, Reform,
Southeast England

I do think there's also part of how the money's used because essentially we have big budgets in the United Kingdom, look at the defence and welfare, NHS and everything. And I feel it's used poorly. For example, okay, house few doors down from mine, social housing, no issues with that. I'm all for helping people who need a bit of help, who are genuine. They had a brick wall replaced. They replaced it. It's fixed by tradesmen who are signed by the council and it fell down again. It was wonky. So the council called out again. They fixed it. They did all these lovely new bricks, but it didn't sort the base out. So it kept falling over literally in the third time they've done it now and it's still wonky. And I think that's a massive example. Our money is wasted in the public sector.

To these people, their lack of support for free school meals was not that they didn't agree with the principle of offering school dinners to every child in England, or that it was too expensive, or wasteful, but instead from a general lack of faith in the state to be able to effectively deliver such a measure.

Lack of trust in the government also lies behind some Britons' unease with the use of statistics in explaining the policy. When prompted with the idea that free school meals would alleviate the food insecurity of around four million children in the UK, some supporters of the policy expressed their distrust at such claims and the sources behind them. This is not only a reminder that emotive, rather than statistics-based arguments, can be more effective in a policy area on a topic relating to child poverty, but also that many possess a deep underlying scepticism around official claims and the government's capacity to deliver.

“

Adam, 43

Police officer,
Reform voter,
Southeast England

Where do they get four million from? How on earth do they come up with that figure? Yeah. No, I don't like this one (...) I mean, how do they work that out? Someone plot that out there. That's obviously some government quango that's come up with some ridiculous spreadsheet for that.

2.4

Responsibility for children

The belief that it is the responsibility for parents to feed their children is another driver of opposition for those who are against extending the policy. Almost half (46 per cent) of those opposed selected this as a reason why, over double the 19 per cent who selected the same nationally.

In focus groups, participants acknowledged the cost of living crisis and the widespread feelings of struggle across the country. Many participants felt these factors are out of any one individual's control and therefore reduce the responsibility of parents alone to feed their children. For Seema and Danielle, when those working full-time are struggling to feed their children, the responsibility is systemic, as opposed to individual.

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Seema, 51

Stay at Home
Mum, Labour to
Reform, Midlands

Yeah, because even the parents that are working full-time, they're still struggling as well. They're paying all their bills, council, tax, everything. Do you know what I mean? So they're just paying everything out and they do struggle. They do struggle to feed their children. It's hard.

“

Danielle, 37

Case worker,
Labour loyalist,
Northwest England

You're working all the hours that God sends really just to make sure that you're giving your kids the best life that you can. And then you've got the cost of living and everything to contend with. So the government definitely needs to be doing more. I don't think it's equal at all.

Focus groups further revealed that public opinion on this issue is open to change.

When presented with the wider benefits of universal free school meal provision including greater equality among children, reduced bullying and stigmatisation, and richer social interactions across the school day, participants responded positively. These outcomes resonate because they speak to held values around fairness and belonging. When these wider benefits are taken into account, concerns about cost or feasibility tend to recede, suggesting that effective communication of these benefits could be a powerful argument for building public support.





I think you've changed my opinion because I'm sitting here thinking, where's all the money coming from? But if we think about what we're creating in a school environment It's that division and you don't want that division. If everyone's treated equally and everyone eats pretty much the same food as made available to everyone, regardless of how much their family is earning (...) I think you've just changed my heart in that sense that actually if we make it a level playing field on a school level, then doesn't it create a more harmonious kind of society. Maybe if schools make it a level playing field, maybe that will create a slightly different future for the children.

“

Sabeena, 48

Office Admin, Labour
to Reform, Midlands

Perhaps most remarkable is that when faced with a list of possible reasons to oppose the policy, over one quarter of people did not find a single reason to oppose it, instead selecting that all children should have access to free school meals. A robust indication for widespread support.



3

WHAT ARE THE VALUES WHICH DRIVE SUPPORT FOR UNIVERSAL FREE SCHOOL MEALS?

During the focus groups, discussions centred around the principles and implementation of universal free school meals to better understand the values that drive either support or opposition towards the policy. From these discussions, some key values emerged as drivers of support.

3.1

What has universal appeal?

The popularity of extending free school meals is in part due to the fact that many see a variety of benefits. When speaking to a range of people with varying experiences and beliefs, a few core values came up across conversations. The most widespread is the need to invest in children's futures. This is not only about children's potential, but also how the UK as a country needs to invest in its children as an investment in the future of the country.

★ Investing in children's futures

Investing in our shared future, and therefore our children's futures, came out as an important core value across voter groups. This benefit came out in a myriad of ways. The most obvious of which are long term population health benefits, driven by the idea that school dinners can play a role in improving children's diets. In the short term, ideally they may reduce the amount of processed foods that children may be consuming at home, and in the long term they introduce children to many new, healthy foods, and more importantly the concept of eating a hot dinner at a dining table with friends or family.



Sabeena, 48
Office Admin, Labour
to Reform, Midlands

So I think to stop it at year two would be detrimental. Just let it carry on till the end of year six and embed that routine and that healthy eating mindset where they're getting a nutritional meal all the way through. Just let it be consistent and let it happen at least up until year six.

Other benefits are to the children's schooling or education, which many see as struggling at the moment with cuts to school budgets. Yet, when the government invests in physical resources, schools and teachers, there's a missed opportunity in not ensuring that the child themselves is prepared for their education by ensuring they are not hungry. To some, these benefits were then not only possessed by individual children, but also their classmates, who benefit from having happy, well behaved peers to interact with, improving the standards of the whole class.

Giving children 'the best start' or the best opportunities, in its most expansive sense, is then also seen to benefit the nation as a whole, by ensuring that the next generation of children can become entrepreneurs, doctors, lawyers, parents and whatever other roles society may demand from them.

“

Heather, 50

Retail Worker, Labour
to Reform, Midlands

I think children are our future, so look after them.

“

Sabeena, 48

Office Admin, Labour
to Reform, Midlands

So if food can be made available to help combat that factor that's contributing to them not learning, will that make a better society in the long-term future?

A similarly powerful, but less immediate, value in universal free school meals is creating a sense of connection in children early on in life. When school dinners can offer every child the same thing, they provide **shared experience** and therefore connection with one another.

★ A shared experience

People referred to the ability for any child to sit down next to another without the divides that often run across our society (i.e. class, ethnicity, or other demographic characteristics). To some, bringing people together can have a potential impact greater than the sum of its parts creating ineffable benefits to social cohesion.

“

Melanie, 64

Admin Worker,
Conservative to
Reform voter,
Yorkshire

If they all eat together (...) it's somewhere where they can go, they can talk and they can eat and it's a safe place and it's an open place for them to go to as well.

“

Justin, 30

IT worker, Labour
loyalist, Northwest
England

The fact that children can eat together, I think it's a very important stage of kids' lives. It's a place where they're doing a lot of the learning, even though it's not in lessons, it's in the lunch halls. And for the social aspect, remember these kids have endured COVID, so they've lost a lot of this time being able to just be in a lunch hall. So yeah, I think kids should definitely be able to eat together and learn together.

While providing a shared experience together, others highlighted the importance of school provision of meals to ensure that children met one another as equals at the dinner table, not just peers.

“

Andy, 68

Retired, Labour
to Conservative,
Southeast England

There's no arguments about you've got better than me or whatever. I think everybody's just get the same and you don't pay for it.

Free school meals have the ability to connect Britons to a greater conception of society and community. This powerful idea of people coming together at one table unites Britons, when so many feel divided for various reasons.

“

Jane, 63

Receptionist, Labour
loyalist, Yorkshire

They are going to work harder and learn to play together and learn stuff in school because they've got a nice good meal down them and they're happy and content because they're not going hungry.

Several participants made the point that this allows people to learn how and where they fit into society. Not only through socialising, but learning about being considerate, polite and respectful, skills which are needed throughout people's lives.

“

Jay, 58

NHS Manager, Labour
loyalist, Yorkshire

It's a really good point that the dining hall is where you learn your social skills. I think that wouldn't have occurred to me, but when I look back at my childhood, my school experience, absolutely it did.

Finally, across many Britons, but particularly those who had experiences of financial hardship themselves, was the idea that universalism in free school meals **offers greater dignity** to those who are in receipt of them.



★ Dignity for recipients

People discussed their own memories of either themselves or people close to them being separated and segregated based on their access to free school meals. While many identified a shift in this over the last decades, several still felt a societal stigma around claiming free school meals, for both the parents, but of highest concern, for the child themselves. Justin, for example, expressed concern about how much of school bullying was based on children's or families' incomes.

“

Justin

IT worker, Labour
loyalist, Northwest
England

The stigma in schooling because nowadays it's a bit of a competition. Everyone wants the best ipad and there's families who can't afford to get these children these bits of equipment, but then they're paying the price because of the bullying situation in the long run.

People broadly recognise how hard school can be for children, either through personal memory or indirect experience, and see that children, whether deliberately or not, often form cliques due to what children may or may not have, be that clothing, technology or school dinners.

Others reflected on their own experiences, and how being identified as a recipient of free school meals often brings about feelings of difference, isolation and even shame among children that can endure.

“

Elaine, 53

Business partner,
Labour loyalist,
Northwest England

So things like school trips, the school will say you can bring money with you, but people on free school meals will be given a packed lunch. So you know they turn up with that school packed lunch, they're on free school meals and people just get to know that. So I think that stigma is still there. With all best intentions. And it's difficult because I think like Colin said, the kids, they're not even really understanding what that means. They're just sort of going, 'Why have they got that?' And I haven't or what does that mean? So it is a stigma and it's something that if you can still remember 40 years ago, it's something that's affected you. So I'm sure the kids now will feel that in 40 years time.

Even to those who believe it is up to individuals to improve their own circumstances, most do not want to see poverty stigmatised. This is particularly true for children who have not had the chance to improve their own circumstances.

“

Cullen, 29

Tradesman, Reform
voter, Southeast
England

So say these days kids go to school and someone ain't got lunch and then they could get bullied, whatever, your family ain't got money or whatever. So I think that actually cuts out a lot of bullying. Everyone's in an even playing field, if everyone's getting free meals.



Many previous Labour voters do not like the idea that children can be picked out due to their reliance on free school meals. There is an underlying principle that, wherever possible, policy should not visibly demarcate differences between children whose families might be low, middle, or high-income, even when it sets out to level the playing field.

“

Melanie, 64

Admin Worker,
Conservative to
Reform voter,
Yorkshire

So in class some people would get milk, them that's paying for it to get milk and them that don't pay for it, they don't get anything. So it's actually dividing them classes again.

3.2

What appeals to Labour supporters?

Three key values appeal most to Labour supporters about universal free school meals: the notion of **fairness** for all children, the idea that children need heightened levels of **care**, and a sense of **nostalgia** for the past. Fairness as a theme came out most strongly, with many intuitively feeling that children all deserve the same start in life and it is the government's role to do its best to provide that.

★ Fairness

Fairness and equality for all children in school, regardless of background or socioeconomic status, is something that resonates deeply across society. Polling shows this to be the third most popular reason for supporting free school meals, yet in conversation the value of equality came through more strongly in centre-left segments of society.

To these groups, ensuring that every child in school has equal access to at least one meal a day was seen simply as the right thing to do. Schools are recognised as safe, nurturing environments, designed to bring out the best in every child, equality of access to something as fundamental as food is viewed as essential to providing this.

“

Brenda, 67

Retired, Labour
loyalist, Yorkshire

They should all be treated the same. If a certain few are getting free school meals, then they all should. That to me, it just goes without saying. You can't make one feel left out because it's just unfair.

However, equality on an individual level for each child cannot be achieved unless regional inconsistencies are dealt with. Across focus groups, there was strong disapproval against the policy being administered to specific areas of the country. There was consensus that if the policy is affordable and feasible for children in one area of the country, it should be extended to all.

“

Brenda, 67

Retired, Labour
loyalist, Yorkshire

That's ludicrous why. Why London? Why do all kids in London get it free? But nowhere else. And Wales, I don't get that. And this is why I think the unfairness starts. People feel badly done to and know, well, that's not fair. They seem to make a habit of this. I mean, that should be across the board.

“

Julie, 66

Retired, Liberal
Democrat voter,
Yorkshire

I was just saying when you look at that, it's like a post-code lottery, isn't it, for the child? If you live in London, Wales or Scotland, then you'll get it, but elsewhere you won't. So in terms of equality, it's either to be everybody or nobody in my opinion.

Care was similarly strong, with this policy seeing more support than other economic interventions as it's specifically targeted at children, the most innocent in our society.



★ Duty to children

The idea that children need to be protected and cared for, no matter their personal circumstances, is intrinsic to most. The value intersects with the idea of fairness and meritocracy, but takes on a particular expression when those values are applied to children. Rules that may be applied to adults, such as personal responsibility and independence, do not apply to discussions around our expectations as to how we feel children should be raised in the UK. Children are in many ways sacred and therefore command the protection of adults and society as a whole.

When discussing trade-offs with other policies that could receive funding from the central government, many place the treatment of children above other priorities due to this view of their innocence. For example, practical arguments around the NHS or defence spending become deprioritised for the transcendental benefits of supporting children.

“

Elaine, 53

Business partner,
Labour loyalist,
Northwest England

Always going to be, the money's got to come from somewhere. So who's going to lose out? it might be the pensioners, it might be the armed forces (...) We haven't got free rein on money. Someone's got to fund that. So there will be losers with that. But for me, I think our children really are a priority for us in terms of looking at the state of this country. So prioritising them would be something that I'd be supporting anyway.

“

Colin, 52

IT manager, Labour
loyalist, Northwest
England

There are a whole lot of things that need funding, but if you were then to go, okay, well, where would you rank these things? I would rank this as very high in importance against some of them, even though the NHS is obviously crucial, other things of importance and stuff, but you look at this and you just say, yeah, that's a no-brainer.

Finally, **nostalgia** came through in some Labour supporters who reflected on a time when they felt the decisions of the country were based on values other than market-logics.

★ Nostalgia for a system which worked differently

Across focus groups, participants organically compared free school meals to the milk bottles supplied by the government pre-1980s.

“

Damian, 63

Semi-retired, Labour
to Reform switcher,
Southeast England

I was a child in the '60s and we all got free milk and that ran up until the end of Margaret Thatcher's reign where the children needed it to get the calcium into them because after the war and leading up to the 60s, nutrition was bad as well and the problem with the teeth. So everybody got a free bottle of milk, a third of a pint and that was taken away by Margaret Thatcher.

To many Labour supporters, pre-Thatcher Britain was a fairer country, with different priorities from those of contemporary society. The idea that the government might do something which cuts against market logic garners support. In many ways, this reminds them of a nostalgic and fairer past.

“

Jane, 63

Receptionist, Labour
loyalist, Yorkshire

Well, every child should have a healthy meal, shouldn't they? It's like when we were children as well, I don't know if they still do it now, you have to give them a bottle of milk every day as well.

3.3

What appeals to more right-leaning voters?

The concept of **fairness** still plays an important role with many recent Labour to Reform switchers, with the idea that children should not be treated differently depending on their parents' levels of income.

“

Maria, 65

Clerical Worker, Labour
to Reform, Midlands

I do think everyone should be equal. Everybody, all kids should feel the same, have the same.

“

Nicola, 29

Estate Agent, Labour
to Reform, Midlands

I think everybody should have a free meal. It doesn't matter what your life's like at home, whether they can afford it or not. I just think every kid should be treated the same. As soon as they go through those school doors, they're all equal.

However, many also express concern that their money (through tax or otherwise) isn't going to the most deserving people in society, or does not benefit those doing their best and working hard. This is another underlying value of the policy, which is **helping working Britons**.

★ **Helping working Britons**

Britons are acutely aware of the cost of living crisis. Many express concern that the social contract is broken, and often feel that those working the hardest do not get their fair share. It is with this rhetoric, around 'alarm clock Britain', that Reform UK is managing to peel off voters to the right and with anger at billionaires that the Greens are squeezing votes to the left.

Previous More in Common research has found that many Britons' thinking around the economy has become increasingly zero-sum. In other words, when the government is seen as assisting one group, it must come at the cost of another in the eyes of the public.

To many Britons, this zero-sum politics is the cause of resentment to immigration in the UK, particularly where they feel like new arrivals to the country are being given priority over long-term residents.

“

Jane, 63

Receptionist, Labour
loyalist, Yorkshire

It's just these illegal immigrants as well. There's so many coming over on boats. We're getting left out because there's no housing for us, there's no jobs for us. They're coming over and getting everything and it's just not right.

“

John, 72

Retired, Labour to
Reform, Yorkshire

I'd like to see them concentrate on the British people rather than the immigrants as I see. I think it's certainly unfair that there's people living on the streets and the immigrants are in a hotel getting fed three meals a day.

While many right wing voters expressed concerns about the government wasting resources on the wrong types of people, and early conversations often centered around attitudes towards migrants, interestingly this was not repeated when discussing free school meals. Instead, when discussing children, fault lines of migrant or native did not arise.

‘The universalism of free school meals, on the other hand, means that everyone benefits equally from the policy, rather than any one group being favoured over another.’

“

John, 72

Retired, Labour to Reform, Yorkshire

I think it's fair enough. And as it says, we can't learn if they're hungry. As long as it's a good nutritional meal, it's got to be good all round.

Zero-sum politics creates a sense among many that it's the ordinary, often hardworking people 'in the middle' being missed by government interventions. Through personal experience, many know how much time and effort preparing kids' packed lunches can be.

“

Siobhan, 34

Environmental Health Officer, Labour to Reform, Midlands

I need to have the shopping in my house to make it and then I have to have the time to actually put it together as well as thinking about a healthy meal option for the kids as well. So it can be time-consuming and it does add a bit more pressure in the week.

The universalism of free school meals, on the other hand, means that everyone benefits equally from the policy, rather than any one group being favoured over another.

“

Susan

Construction Worker, Labour to Reform switcher, Yorkshire

Punishing the child for the parents working. The parents can be working and then kids could still not be getting fed.

“

Maria

Clerical Worker,
Labour to Reform
switcher, Midlands

I mean, a lot of these people that are getting free meals, they don't want to work. There's people out there like ourselves and we go to work, we've always worked and that, and we don't get anything for nothing.

Parents also identified this policy as not only financially helping these working individuals and families, but allowing them to simply 'get on' with other things, be that worrying less about the weekly shop or being able to spend more time with their kids.

Another strong value among more right-leaning voters was that of **British decency**, the idea being that in a country such as Britain, no child should be left hungry.

★ **British decency**

One of the key concerns expressed by Labour to Reform switchers is that of a basic sense of decency – child poverty should not exist in a nation with the levels of wealth which are seen across the country. Many current Reform voters are appalled with the idea that child poverty is as common as it currently is within the UK. At the same time, many relate to a rich history of a strong welfare state and a proud national allegiance to institutions such as the NHS, state-funded schools and social housing.

It is clear that the UK is, to these voters, seen as a wealthy country, but also a country which should offer a safety net and provide for the essentials for its own population, especially the young.

“

Sabeena, 48

Office Admin, Labour
to Reform, Midlands

And it is upsetting, isn't it? I think when you think you're living in a first world country that there's children that are hungry that can't learn, that means they're not going to be able to access education to the best level that they can, which will then go on to have long-term consequences (...) that sentence where children are hungry, they can't learn is really upsetting because children shouldn't have to be struggling for food in this country.

“

Nicola, 29

Estate Agent, Labour
to Reform, Midlands

This isn't the kind of country where we should worry about children being hungry.

“

Sabeena, 48

Office Admin, Labour
to Reform, Midlands

Why are we having this discussion in 2026? Four million children in the United Kingdom, food insecurities. That's really, really bad. And I'm just thinking what's the knock-on effect of that? What is that going to impact in terms of the futures of these young people that are going through food insecurities where they're not getting a basic essential?

“

Brenda, 67

Yorkshire, Labour
Loyalist, Yorkshire

Yeah, I mean, that's a ridiculous amount. Four million kids in food poverty. We should be ashamed to be fair. It shouldn't be like that. It's crazy.

This relates to the idea that children should be valued in our society, and that any 'good', 'decent' and 'ethical' nation would ensure that no child is left going hungry. To more right-leaning Britons, then, free school meals is the decent thing to do – the kind of policy they expect from the country they are proud of.

4

CONCLUSION

Universal free school meals is a very popular policy. Admittedly, as with all public opinion research, support in the abstract should not be mistaken for deep underlying enthusiasm when trade-offs are introduced, and other claims to public finances are made.

Yet what is striking from this research is that universal free school meals is popular across party lines, and with all elements of Labour's 2024 voter coalition. The values that underpin this vary considerably.

There are some which are shared broadly among Britons, including **investing in children's futures**, giving children **shared experiences** and providing **dignity for all**. Those leaning right tend to back the policy for **helping working people** and in living up to a notion of **British decency**, while core Labour supporters are motivated by notions of **fairness, duty to care for children**, and **nostalgia for a system which worked differently**.

Nonetheless, the strength of the policy pulls together many disparate groups. At a time when three quarters of the public thinks the country is heading in the wrong direction, and when trust in the government to deliver the change on which platform it was elected is faltering, universal free school meals resonate as a way of making a real difference for many Britons.

“

Vicky

Sales Admin, Reform voter, Yorkshire

I do feel that obviously if they're in infants, they get the free school dinner. I do think that that should be all primary school children. Well, all school children, to be honest with you, why should it just be infants? It should be all school children, I think that would help.

“

Courtney

Cleaner, Reform voter, Southeast England

I am grateful for the free school meals and I don't think it should be stopped at a certain age because I see it as in a lot of children go to school and that's their safe space, unfortunately. It's very sad and I don't think at a certain year it should get then taken away. The child doesn't pick what family they're born into and I just get really upset and I wouldn't want to see any child go without or if the parent's not bothering to pay for their meals, then what would happen.

Indeed, many even question the concept of having a cut off for offering children a free school meal at all. Almost two-fifths (38 per cent) of Britons want to see free school meals extended to all children under the age of 16, not just to primary school children.

There are so many issues which divide Britons today, but free school meals is not one of them. Despite considerable differences in underlying values, Britons from across the political spectrum can find reasons to support it. What this research shows most clearly, then, is that how this policy is pitched is vital. To some, it is nostalgia for a lost Britain, to others, an investment in the future of the economy; and to most Britons, universal free school meals is an opportunity for the government to deliver on their top issue – the cost of living crisis.



METHODOLOGY

Quantitative research

Polling in this report was conducted by More in Common, a member of the British Polling Council.

Nationally representative polling: More in Common's polls are weighted and allocated to be representative of the adult population of Great Britain.

The polling used in this report was conducted:

- **10–13 April 2026**, N = 2,011
- **19–22 June 2026**, N = 2,993

Qualitative Research

For this report, More in Common held 4 focus groups recruited by a combination of segment, voting intention, region, parental status or gender.

Group 1: Tuesday 19 May 2026

Dissenting Disruptor, Parents, Reform voters, South East England

Group 2: Tuesday 19 May 2026

Rooted Patriots, Parents, mixed voting intention, North West England

Group 3: Thursday 21 May 2026

Rooted Patriots, Grandparents, mixed voting intention, Yorkshire

Group 4: Thursday 21 May 2026

All women, voted Labour in 2024, current voting intention: Reform UK, Midlands



National Education Union

The National Education Union (NEU) stands up for the future of education. It brings together the voices of half a million teachers, lecturers, support staff and leaders working in maintained and independent schools and colleges across the UK, to form the largest education union in Europe.

For three years, the NEU has spearheaded the No Child Left Behind campaign, urging the Government to extend Free School Meals to every child in primary school in England.



freeschoolmealsforall.org.uk

More in Common

More in Common is a non-profit research agency that aims to understand what Britons think and why.

Providing in-depth and timely insights to policymakers, journalists, and the organisations trying to navigate some of the most divisive issues of the day – and highlighting a path to what brings Britons together.



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