

# 2021 ParentPay and LACA School Meals Report

A parents' view



# Who we are



ParentPay Group is the UK's largest education technology business, and trusted by schools UK wide to deliver a seamless cashless payment and paperless meal management service. Our products use cloud-based technology to streamline processes, improve engagement with parents and simplify meal management for catering teams and schools. It's no wonder 12,000 schools and 200 Local Authorities across the UK trust ParentPay to take their payments and meals paperless.

[www.parentpay.com](http://www.parentpay.com)



Cypad is the technology behind the specialist meal & kitchen management solutions within the ParentPay Group, which fully integrate with our key group products. Designed to provide a paperless catering management solution across single or multiple sites, Cypad allows kitchens to become fully digital and centralised, whether you are a MAT managing school meals in-house, a contract caterer with a school meal contract with hundreds of schools or a single primary school with a school cook. Using Cypad technology, the ParentPay Group can help you maximise and maintain the safeguarding of your pupils and give parents total peace of mind.

[www.Cypad.com](http://www.Cypad.com)



Established in 1989, LACA is the leading body representing professional catering managers and chefs working in the school sector across local authorities, private contractors and individual schools and academies. Since its inception, LACA has set out to inform, develop, represent and support its members through a range of initiatives and services which include:

Campaigning and lobbying industry and Government to improve the school food service.

National and regional events and networking opportunities including the annual LACA Main Event and School Food Show

Competitions to promote excellence in school food including School Chef of the Year and Finishing Touches

Learning and development tools and support including allergen risk assessment guides, menu checking services and e-learning courses.

Find out more about LACA and the benefits of membership at

[www.laca.co.uk](http://www.laca.co.uk)

# Introduction

The aim of this research is to understand the parental view on the school meal service and offer available to their children. Many studies have been conducted understanding the caterer's view and challenges, but together ParentPay and LACA have conducted one of the largest studies ever undertaken with parents.

As an organisation in its 31st year, LACA has long been recognised as an association representing and supporting school catering organisations and teams across the country, with 80% of school catering services being delivered by its members.

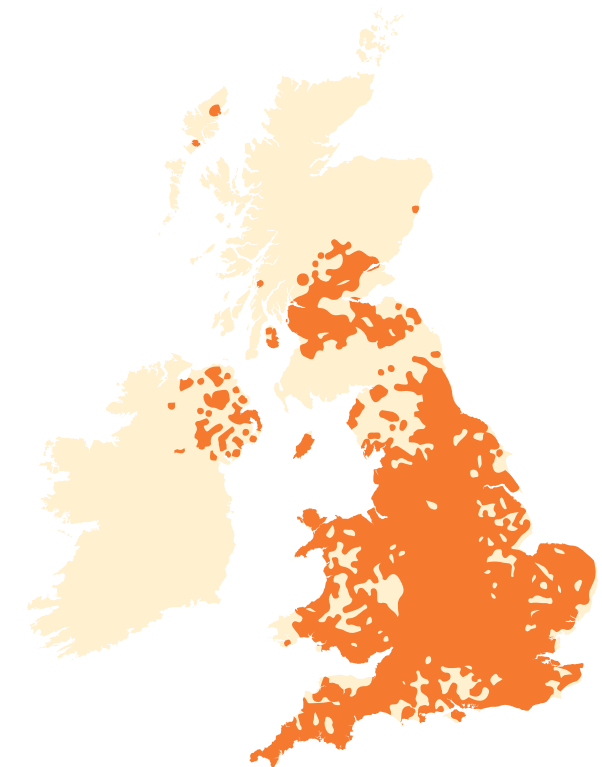
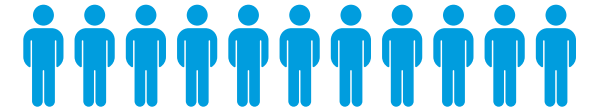
This study helps us to understand what caterers and school leadership teams need to do to ensure their clients and families are happy with the service provided. Looking to the future, additional surveys of this nature will provide an ongoing understanding of the needs of parents/guardians, school leadership and catering teams.

Primary **73,741**

Junior **44,984** Infant **28,757**



Secondary **65,469**



This research was conducted with ParentPay users in June 2021.

Responses were received from over

**139,000 parents**

and carers with children in both primary and secondary schools across the UK. The map adjacent shows the reach of our survey.

# Meal Provision



**88.8%**

of primary school children are choosing a school meal at least one day each week



**91.8%**

of secondary pupils are opting for a school meal at least once a week



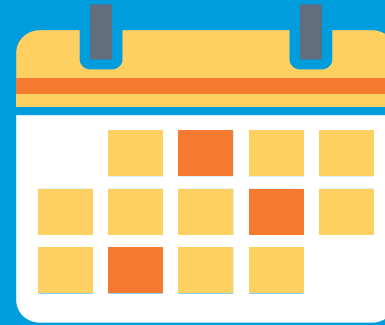
**87.9%**

of pupils choosing a school meal are doing so every day of the week



**80.2%**

of parents using a school meal service think school meals are priced appropriately



**93.9%**

of infant children opt for school meals at least once a week. This reduces to 85.6% once UIFSM ends at the end of year 2 – a drop off of 8.3%

Since September 2014 all children in state-funded English infant schools (reception, year 1 and year 2) have been eligible to receive a free school meal under the Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM) policy. The policy's stated aims are:

- Improving children's educational attainment, social skills and behaviour
- Ensuring children have access to a healthy meal a day and develop long-term healthy eating habits
- Helping families with the cost of living, and
- Removing disincentives to work

**22.7%**

of respondents are entitled to free school meals (FSM)

One of the 14 recommendations in the National Food Strategy is to extend eligibility for free school meals. "Parents are responsible for feeding their children, but government must step in for children whose parents are unable to do so."

**National Food Strategy recommendations for schools (July 2021)**

[www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/National-Food-Strategy-Chapter-16.pdf](http://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/National-Food-Strategy-Chapter-16.pdf)

# Meal Choice

When asked what factors would make parents more likely to choose **school meals more frequently** or **change to school meals** where they are not currently choosing any they stated:



**1. More options for pupils to be able to choose their meals**



**2. More variation on hot and cold options**



**3. Lower costs for hot school meals**



**Parent View** "Improvements need to be made within the school system to ensure at least a few days of meat-free meals during the week. Even one or two vegetarian or vegan days for every school would make a difference, as well as have a really positive impact on the environment by reducing meat consumption."



# Special Diets and Allergies

**12%**

have an alternative dietary requirement

**7.6%**

require provisions for a religious diet

**3.8%**

require vegetarian or vegan diet options

**23.8%**

feel that allergies and special dietary requirements are not managed appropriately resulting in them opting to provide their own lunches for their child

## Technology tip

Managing allergies and safeguarding pupils must be a key priority for all caterers. Support tools that enable this to be done in an automated and streamlined way help reduce human error and minimise risk, helping to increase confidence for parents that they are selecting a meal that adheres to their child's religious, cultural, dietary and allergy requirements.

**9,418 (6.8%)**

of respondents reported that they have a child with at least one food allergy

Top 5 allergies:



**Peanuts – 1.8%**



**Milk – 1.6%**



**Eggs – 0.9%**



**Nuts – 0.54%**



**Fish – 0.53%**

In the UK, 1-2% of adults have a food allergy. This, combined with the 5-8% of children with a food allergy, equates to about 2 million people. This figure doesn't include those with food intolerances. This means the actual number of affected people living with a food allergy and/or food intolerance is considerably more. (Food Standards Agency 2016)



*LACA have developed guidance for managing allergen requirements, including a process for analysing individual pupils. The tool allows users to assess individual pupils risk and the processes that are being used by the school catering service to manage that risk.*

**Stephen Forster, LACA Ltd.**



# Quality & Sustainability

Key for parents when considering the quality of school meals is a variety of healthy and nutritious options that adhere to food standards.

## 86.4%

ranked the variety of meals on offer the most important factor when considering the quality of school meals provided

## 53.6%

of those surveyed said that ensuring the school kitchen adheres to appropriate food standards is an important consideration

## 31.6%

of parents/guardians that took part in the survey said it is important that school meals are visually appealing

Other considerations raised by parents regarding the overall quality of school meals provided included whether the child likes / will eat the options available, if the portion size is appropriate and if there is enough time for their child to queue for the food and eat it during the allocated lunch period.

## ! Top tip

It is important for school food providers, school leaders and government to consider how they inform parents and children on the importance of food sourcing and sustainability and in particular the effects those choices can have on their health and the environment.



## 29.4%

of parents say that sustainability and ethical sourcing of ingredients is a factor they consider when choosing to select school meals

## Technology tip

Invest in kitchen and meal management software that gives schools and caterers the ability to offer meal pre-ordering, allowing the variety of meals offered to be increased without increasing food waste.

This research has shown that being able to offer pupils more meal choices will increase meal uptake figures.



**Parent View** “Children and young adults should be made aware of the climate impacts of meat, dairy, poultry and fish consumption. We’re not vegan, this issue is about sustainable food resourcing on a planet facing extinction.”

# School Meal Information



**55.2%**

of parents surveyed said they do not receive enough information about school meals from their school



**65.8%**

of parents say they do not get enough information from the school about the menu for the day/week



**33.7%**

of respondents did not know if their school provides a breakfast club facility



**Parent View** "I'd like to see a description of what each dish is because the vague names on the menu don't always match what we expect it to be."

The top 3 areas highlighted by parents as information they would like to receive from the school are:

**65.8%**

The menu for the week/day

**31.2%**

How healthy eating is promoted to children

**25.3%**

The nutritional content of the meals

## ! Top tip

Parents also commented that they would like to see a price list of menu items available to purchase on the day and to understand the options that have been selected from the menu or cafeteria by their child.



*Many schools now provide both breakfast and afterschool clubs which include the provision of a meal or snack. Research suggests that a healthy breakfast and other wrap-around food services, including holiday clubs for children, can help improve their academic performance and to achieve their full educational potential. LACA are to publish guidance shortly that will support caterers to achieve this.*

**Jacquie Blake**, National Chair, LACA



# Technology & Communication

The top 3 methods used by schools to communicate with parents are:



**1. Email**



**2. Text message**



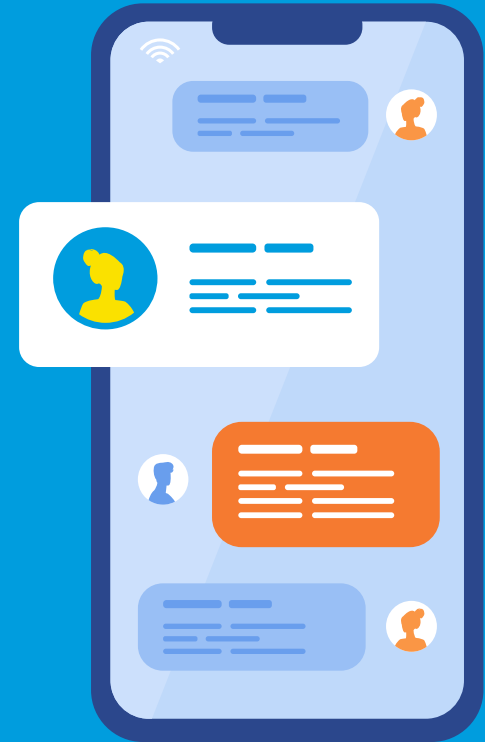
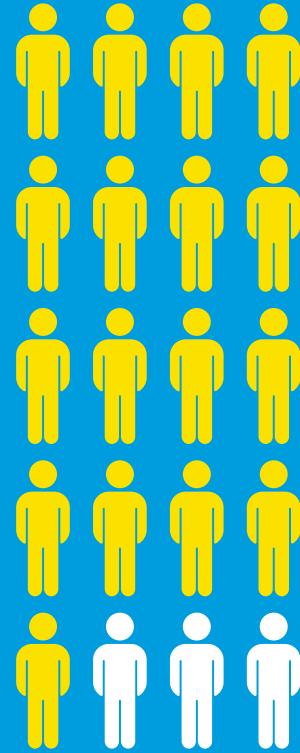
**3. School app direct messages**

**82%**

of parents say their school no longer accepts cash payments for school meals or activities

**98.7%**

of parents plan to pay for school related costs online, post pandemic



**84%**

of parents surveyed stated that they are more familiar with using technology to communicate with their child's school as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic



## Technology tip

Schools harnessing technology to improve parent communication can be further enhanced with meal management software that can be integrated with existing communication software, allowing school kitchens and caterers to easily communicate with parents on menus and nutrition

# Cooking on the Curriculum



## 97.7%

**of parents surveyed think cooking should be part of the curriculum**

Developing a whole school approach to food education that goes beyond lunchtime is key to helping children develop healthy attitudes and make informed and healthy food and drink choices.

**There is also evidence that growing food in schools:**

- Improves awareness and understanding of the natural environment and its importance to us
- Promotes health and well-being, particularly in relation to diet and nutrition

**Food Growing in Schools Taskforce Report, March 2012**

[www.foodgrowingschools.org/resources/files/FGIS%20main%20report%20for%20www.PDF](http://www.foodgrowingschools.org/resources/files/FGIS%20main%20report%20for%20www.PDF)

## Launch a new 'Eat and Learn' initiative for schools

Parents surveyed agree with the conclusions of the National Food Strategy and the School Food Plan which states that schools should "instill a love of cooking in pupils", while teaching them the kitchen skills necessary "to feed themselves and others affordably and well, now and in later life"

**National Food Strategy recommendations for schools (July 2021)**

[www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/National-Food-Strategy-Chapter-16.pdf](http://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/National-Food-Strategy-Chapter-16.pdf)



*It was fabulous to see the children getting to grips with the chopping of vegetables and working collaboratively. The children learned a lot about rationing and preparing vegetables. The activity of making the WW2 inspired soup was just fantastic!*

*It was a bit of an eye opener on our behalf, regarding their knowledge on vegetables – I think most children learnt something new that day. We even had one child who had never tried soup before! You'll be pleased to know, he loved it!*

**Headteacher, Plymouth**

# Summary and Recommendations

## Summary of key findings:

- 1** The majority of parents feel that school meals are priced correctly.
- 2** Key initiatives, such as 'Eat and Learn' outlined in the recommendations of the National Food Strategy report (July 2021) should be prioritised and would be well received by parents.
- 3** While vast strides have been made in improving school meals, some topics raised by parents shows there is more work to be done in terms of communicating on key issues that include:
  - allergen management
  - special dietary options
  - sustainable sourcing and its impacts
  - healthy and nutritious menu choices
- 4** Parents and carers want clear visibility on the week's menu options, and the ability to order meals in advance.

## Recommended actions for caterers and schools:

- 1** Teachers and senior leadership teams need to engage with caterers for a whole school approach (including parents and pupils) to promote the benefits of healthy choices.
- 2** Develop wrap-around provisions, providing meals or snacks during breakfast and at afterschool clubs.
- 3** Engage with parents and pupils to provide relevant tools and information that reassure parents - including special diets and allergens.
- 4** Invest in technology that will improve parent and pupil experience of school meals. Taking meal management online and reducing paper processes also saves schools and caterers time and money.
- 5** Support the recommendation to enable cooking and food education on the school curriculum.
- 6** Communicate to parents and children the importance of food sourcing and sustainability. Particularly the impact this can have on health and the environment.

