



The British Academy

Policy Histories Seminar: The History of the UK School Meals Service

Summary

The British Academy's [Policy Histories](#) programme draws on the very best expertise from across the humanities and social sciences, using historical insights and learning from the past to inform policy making. Recent publications include analytical reports on the histories of regional development, environmental and health policies in the UK.

This Policy Histories seminar showcased findings from the ESRC-funded project [The UK School Meals Service: Past, Present and Future?](#)—the first comprehensive historical study of school meals across the nations of the UK. Since its creation in 1906, the School Meals Service has delivered more than 54 billion meals, evolving in step with wider political, social, and economic shifts. This research demonstrates that school meals are not only about nutrition: they are also sites of care, inequality, memory, and belonging, reflecting how society understands and values childhood itself.

The session included a short presentation of key trends and findings by the research project leads Professor Gary McCulloch (UCL), Dr Heather Ellis (University of Sheffield), and Professor Gurpinder Lalli (University of Wolverhampton). This was followed by responses from Baroness Lister of Burtsett CBE FBA and Professor Catherine Law FMedSci. There was then a wide-ranging open discussion chaired by Professor Ann Phoenix FBA designed to generate dialogue about what a historically informed school meals policy could look like for the future. Participants included a range of local and national policymakers, practitioners, and researchers with an interest in school meals policy.

Research findings

The research team began by explaining their project's aims and placing the UK School Meals Service (SMS) in a historical and policy context. The project explores the aims, achievement and limitations of the SMS from its inception in 1906. It seeks to discover the impact of the SMS on schools, communities and pupils. It foregrounds the lived experiences of children, teachers and catering staff from past and present to challenge conventional narratives about how school meals have been imagined, funded and delivered. Drawing on oral histories, extensive archival research, and contemporary ethnographic work in schools, the project integrates lived experience across generations with long-term policy analysis. Rather than treating history as contextual background, this approach connects everyday practices in schools to structural shifts in governance, funding, and institutional design over time.

The history of the SMS is not a story of gradual progress, but rather one that may be understood in three stages of development:



These stages reveal how school meals policy reflects a changing society and its relationship to the past. Several key historical insights emerged about the role that school meals play in relation to educational and health outcomes:

- School mealtimes are an important aspect of the learning environment for children, as well as a vital form of social infrastructure providing opportunities for connection and supporting children to thrive.
- Means-tested free meals have historically carried a sense of shame and embarrassment for many who receive them.
- Conversely, school meals can be a site of children's agency and everyday resistance, where pupils have found ways to assert their autonomy.
- Culturally exclusionary menu offerings persist in many schools.

These recommendations arise directly from the long-term patterns identified in the research. In particular, the historical analysis reveals recurring fragmentation following decentralisation, the persistence of stigma under means-tested systems, the impact of marketisation on equity and quality, and the gradual de-professionalisation of the school meals workforce. The policy proposals therefore respond not only to current pressures, but to structural dynamics visible across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This was followed by an overview of the key policy recommendations that have emerged from the research:

- Work actively to restore Universal Free School Meals in state-funded schools across the UK.
- Reframe school meals as core educational infrastructure.
- Design inclusive dining environments.
- Professionalise the school meals workforce.
- Update nutritional standards for equity and inclusion.
- Centre pupil agency in whole-school food strategies.



Expert responses

Baroness Lister of Burtsett OBE FBA responded that the project's findings fit well with the British Academy's policy programme on [Reframing Childhood \(2022\)](#). This focused on children as both 'beings' and 'becomings', a framing that resonates strongly with the research team's emphasis on how school meals are experienced and felt, and the importance of the environment in which they are eaten. These aspects are central to the quality of childhood, and their potential value as part of the learning environment and the wider school infrastructure should not be underestimated. Hungry children make poor learners, and this understanding has influenced the recent Government policy to extend Free School Meals to all on universal credit. School meals are important to children both as 'beings' in the here and now, and as 'becomings' in terms of their lives ahead, setting them up well to thrive and succeed in the future. Additionally, the research complements two other core themes of the childhood policy programme, namely the importance of children's voices and participation, and the role of children's rights.

Professor Catherine Law FMedSci began by reflecting on recent work undertaken by the Academy of Medical Sciences that is relevant to school meals policy, which includes three reports on child healthⁱ and one on childhood obesity.ⁱⁱ Professor Law emphasised that health inequalities, child poverty and climate change are 'wicked problems' that require whole systems and multidisciplinary perspectives as well as rigorous synthesis and translation. She explained that universal interventions to address health inequalities are generally more effective than targeted interventions, but benefits may be multiple and difficult to separate, and so it can be challenging to make the case for funding. School meals are an investment in the health and wealth of the nation, and nutrition is a critical aspect. Professor Law foregrounded the importance of including the voices of children and young people who are most in need and least heard in the development of school meals policy.

Professor Ann Phoenix FBA argued that we need a holistic approach to school meals, which are about nutrition but also about imagining the kind of society that we wish to create. School meals reflect societal values of the present and the future. They are about care, inequalities, inclusion and the way in which we view childhood. As such, school meals policy is a crucial site where all these aspects must be negotiated.

i [Academy of Medical Sciences, Prioritising early childhood to promote the nation's health, wellbeing and prosperity, \(AMS, 2024\)](#); [Academy of Medical Sciences, Prioritising health in the early years, \(AMS, 2024\)](#); [Academy of Medical Sciences, Child health, wellbeing and inequities: influencing policy in changing social and political environments, \(AMS, 2025\)](#).

ii [Academy of Medical Sciences & Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Early years interventions to tackle childhood obesity and promote life-long health, \(AMS, 2025\)](#)

Synthesis of discussion

Below is a synthesis of the main points from the open discussion amongst participants which has been organised into a set of broader themes that emerged from the seminar. Remarks are not attributed to specific participants. They do not capture every point made, but are intended to provide the reader with a range of insights from the discussion.

Children

- Centring the voices of children and young people is the most powerful way we can ensure that school meals policy works for them. Children and young people can be involved in aspects such as developing and devising menus, and evaluating existing provision.
- Engaging children in the design of school meals menus and environments within schools can help to ensure that the provision meets their diverse needs. This is particularly important for developing menus and dining rooms that are inclusive for neurodivergent children who may have complex sensory needs.
- School food is a means through which some of the needs and desires of children can be met, especially in terms of health, nutrition and wellbeing. They can also foster a sense of inclusion and belonging in schools, particularly when they reflect the cultures and communities of their pupils.
- School meals play an important role in sensory education. They are the only part of the school day that engages all of the senses and could be used as an educational tool as part of the curriculum.

Culture and diversity

- School menu offerings often lack cultural diversity, for example leaning heavily towards 'traditional' British food. This can be at odds with the broader demographics of the local area, especially in areas of greater diversity. Additionally, there have been instances where the school lunch offerings do not always take account of the cultural backgrounds of all students. A participant at the seminar shared the example of a school with a high proportion of Muslim students that did not consider the need for halal meat to be provided.
- Packed lunches have become a site of culinary diversity in school canteens. Lunch times in schools which serve diverse communities provide opportunity for students to share elements of their home and culture with their friends and classmates.
- Both school-provided meals and packed lunches provide opportunities for socialisation, enabling students to form connections with each other, as well as to socialise with friends.

Policy context

- Due to the strong element of taxpayer subsidy in school meals, they are often regarded as a significant cost to the exchequer. However, given the huge benefits they confer, they should be viewed as an important public investment in children's lives and futures. School meals have a strong impact on health, wellbeing and educational attainment, leading to longer term social and economic benefits.
- The Compulsory Competitive Tendering system which requires local authorities to put school meals services out to private tender has led to an overall decline in the quality of school meals, prioritising saving money over nutritional standards.
- The devolution of school meals policy has created challenges that has led to uneven provision across the country. For example, participants noted that there is a huge disparity in quality and pricing of school meals across the four nations of the UK.
- In addition to cost disparity, there is also disparity in eligibility for free school meals (FSM) across different areas of the UK. For example, while children in the infant years (the first three years of primary school) are eligible for FSM across England, the Greater London Authority has extended this eligibility across all seven years of primary school.
- Historically Universal Free School Meals has been associated with a politically progressive stance, which some participants argued needs to be rearticulated in our current context to make support for the policy less political. It was noted that although Universal Free School Meals has supporters across the political spectrum, its association with particular political discourses has impacted support and opposition at different times in its history.

We hope the insights from this seminar will provide useful ideas to inform current and future policy and practice in this area.

About our work

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