

# Free School Meals and Children's Rights

Connie Dalton

Northumbria University

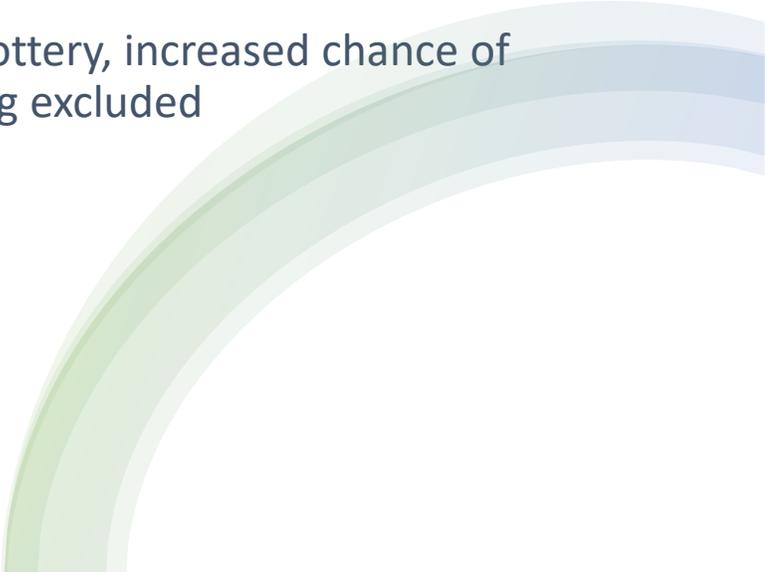


# Introduction

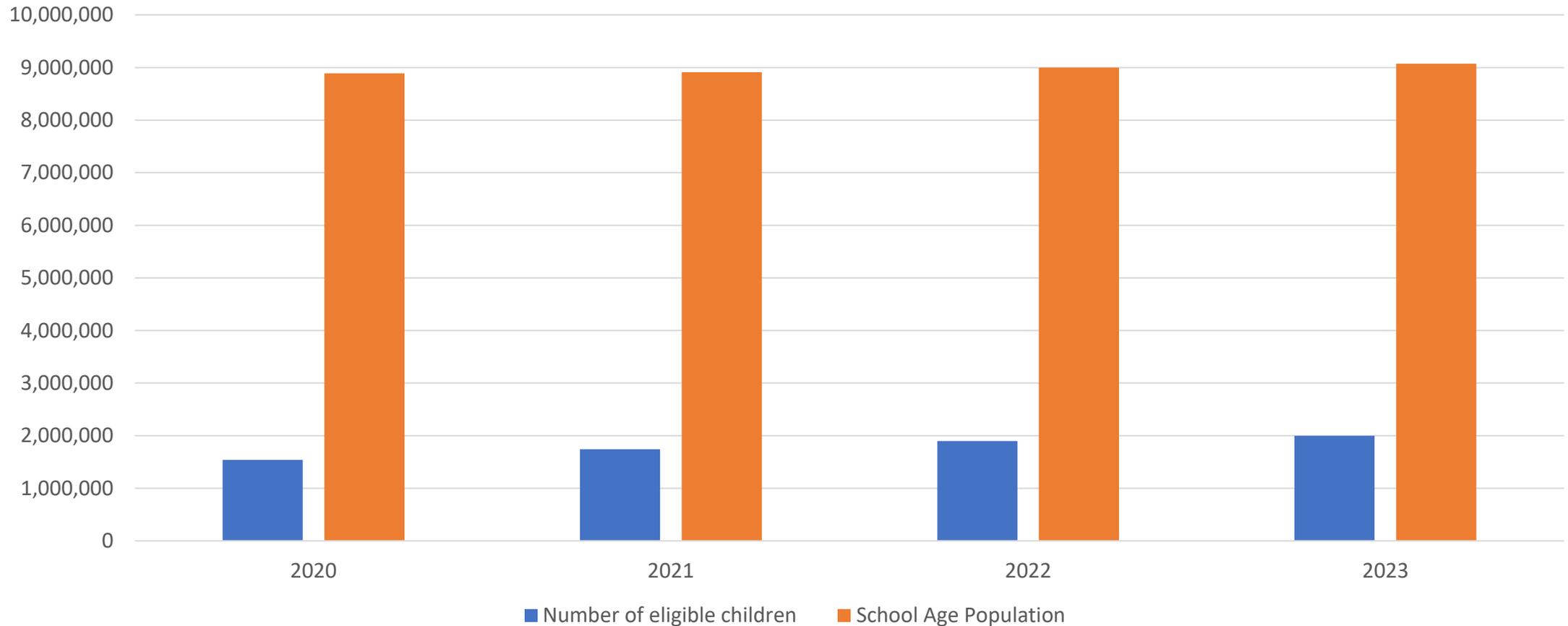
- Free School Meal eligible for the majority of primary and secondary school
- Went to a grammar school which had a very low % of FSM eligibility (Only 7% of all pupils in all grammar schools in NI are FSM eligible)
- Undergrad: Geography (Dissertation focused on the Right to Food and the spatial distribution and accessibility of food banks across North and West Belfast)
- Masters: Human Rights LLM (Dissertation looked at Truth Recovery 20 years post GFA in Northern Ireland)
- Final year PhD student at Northumbria



# Background on Free School Meals in the UK

- Free School Meals are longstanding in the United Kingdom
  - It has had many forms over the years from a charitable provision to a means-tested benefit
  - Following 1999, and the introduction of devolution, each of the four legislatures have control over their own eligibility criteria for FSM
  - Positives: tailored eligibility for their own populations, ability to adapt and change legislation relatively quickly
  - Negatives: Creates a postcode lottery, increased chance of children and young people being excluded
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# Eligibility vs School Aged Population (England)



Source: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>

## Rally calls for free school meals for all



[https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2023/09/24/news/rally\\_calls\\_for\\_free\\_school\\_meals\\_for\\_all-3639694/](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2023/09/24/news/rally_calls_for_free_school_meals_for_all-3639694/)

## Olivia Colman and Kate Winslet among dozens of celebs urging PM to fund free school meals for all

The calls come as Wales and Scotland extend free school meals to all primary school children, while Sadiq Khan implements the scheme in London.

Monday 2 October 2023 05:42, UK

<https://news.sky.com/story/olivia-colman-and-kate-winslet-among-dozens-of-celebs-urging-pm-to-fund-free-school-meals-for-all-12974762>

## First area gives free secondary school meals for all



<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4nj11lwlwgo>

Holly Patrick | 2 days ago



### 'Britain's strictest headteacher' says free school meals 'undermine personal responsibility'

Free school meals for every child would "undermine the sense of personal responsibility" in parents, a headteacher once described as "Britain's strictest" has said.

Katharine Birbalsingh spoke to **TalkTV** after dozens of celebrities, including **Kate Winslet** and **Ed Sheeran**, signed an open letter urging Rishi Sunak to extend free school meals to all children in primary schools.

"The idea that the very richest in society should not be encouraged to buy their own children lunch... undermines the sense of personal responsibility that we should all admire in parents," the Michaela School founder said.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/tv/news/free-school-meals-eligibility-letter-b2422539.html>



Okay, so how do children's rights come into this?

- Article 12 states that children and young people have the right to express their views and feelings on all matters that affect them, and have those views and feelings taken seriously.
- Children are not passive actors in their own lives, and are in fact experts in their own experiences
- It is important for adults to find ways to enable all children to share their experiences and consider these experiences in policy and decision making
- Active listening is required



# Children's Rights in the UK

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) was ratified by the United Kingdom in 1990

The UK don't write international treaties into law, instead they apply it in different ways through Children's Commissioners and Children's Rights Impact Assessments

Many schools across the UK have student councils to allow elected students to share their concerns

However, having rights does not always mean you can exercise these rights

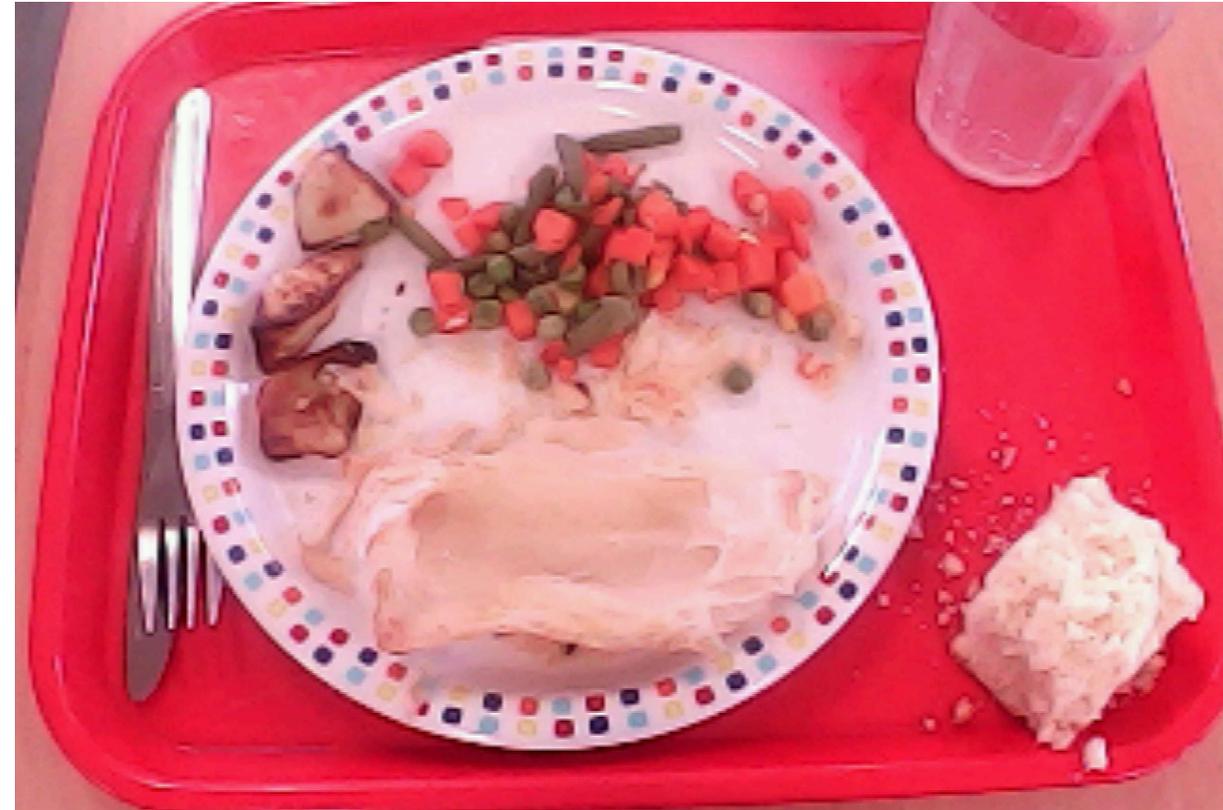
# Free School Meals and Children's Rights

- There is a “legal blackhole” around responsibility for food provision (Shields, 2021)
- The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted both the importance but also the vulnerabilities of the FSM system
- My research is looking at the exclusions within FSM policy across the devolved nations of the UK from the perspectives of stakeholders
- Research from academics and NGOs all share that the uptake of FSM lower than expected, Day et al (2015) quote that 73% of children have never been asked their opinion on school food
- Through my study, I'm asking children about their experiences on lunch time.

“Because the younger ones go first, sometimes by the time we get there, there’s nothing left I really like”.



“I don't always like the dinner, but I like that we are encouraged to try”



# Some of their suggestions

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Playing music to make sure lunch is a calming environment

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Mixing up the types of fruit and veg available to promote trying new things

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Keep the unlimited milk and water, but maybe have some diluted juice or fruit juice too

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Have bigger chairs for the older pupils so they're comfortable

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Let them have a say in the menu options



# Contact Me!

- Email: [connie.dalton@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:connie.dalton@northumbria.ac.uk)
  - X: @connie\_dalt

# References

- Day, R. E., Sahota, P., Christian, M. S. and Cocks, K. (2015) 'A qualitative study exploring pupil and school staff perceptions of school meal provision in England', *British Journal of Nutrition*, 114(9), pp. 1504-1514.
- Shields, K., (2021), *Free School Meals and Governmental Responsibility for Food Provision*, *Edinburgh Law Review*, 25(1).
- United Nations, (1989), *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, available: <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>