

Exploring Options to Expand Free School Meal Eligibility: Perspectives from Parents and Schools in Doncaster



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BACKGROUND

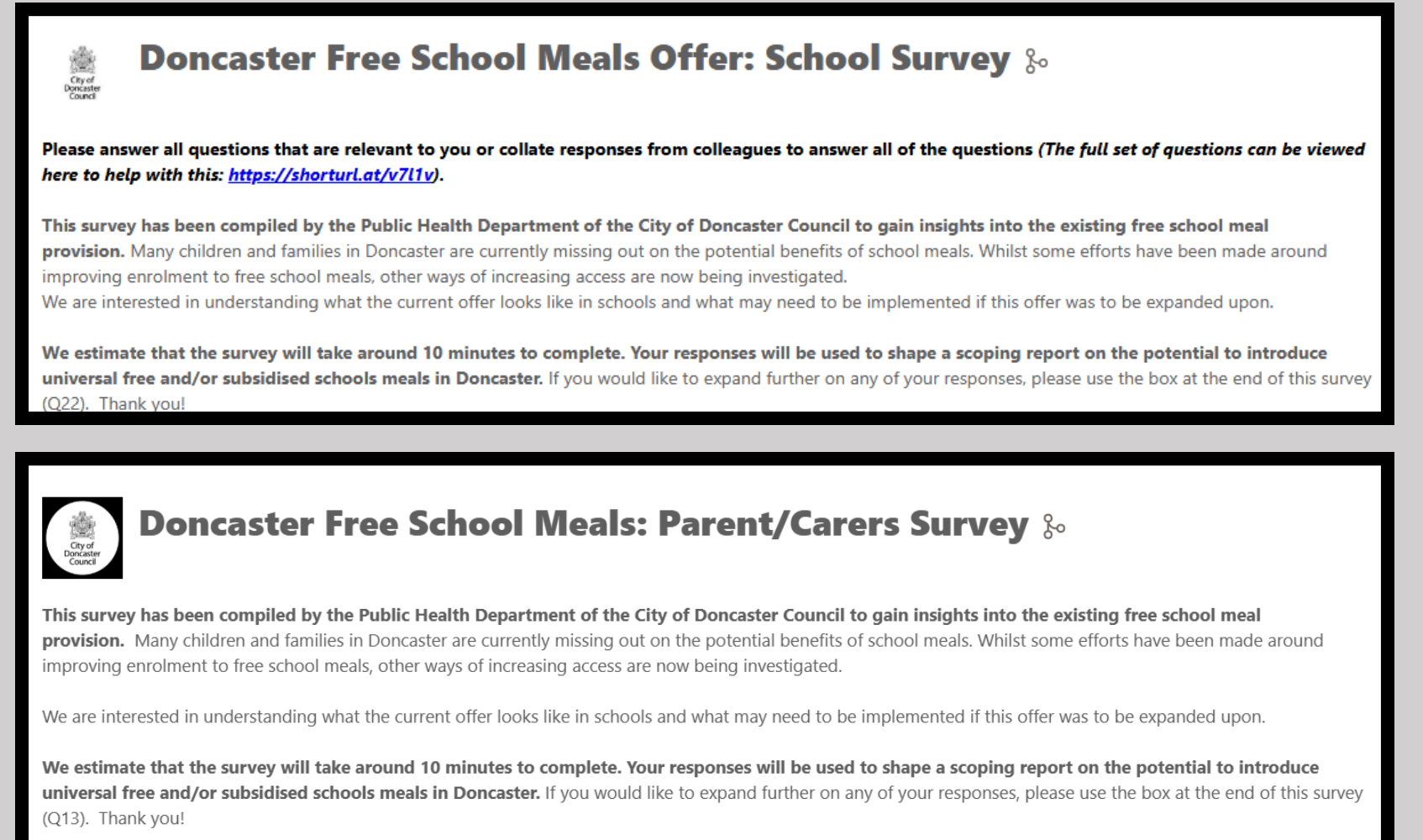
School meals can improve children's dietary intake and are often nutritionally superior to packed lunches (Haney et al., 2022). In Doncaster, financial barriers and limited eligibility for free school meals (FSM) prevent many children from accessing school meals. Universal FSM would remove these barriers, ensuring all children receive a hot nutritious meal daily. Universal FSM are also associated with broader benefits, including improved attendance, academic outcomes, reduced stigma, and financial relief for families (Impact on Urban Health, 2024).

AIM

To examine the perspectives of schools, parents and carers in Doncaster on expanding the current FSM provision, including preferred expansion model, implementation considerations, and perceived impacts.

METHODS

Two online surveys (August 2025 – February 2026) were conducted:



Survey 1 - School-based professionals, recruited through school forums and existing school contacts

- Primary schools: $n = 42$
- Secondary schools: $n = 6$
- Special schools: $n = 2$

Survey 2 - Parents and carers, reached via the council's communication channels ($n = 405$).



Building opportunities for healthier, happier, and longer lives for all



Nurturing a child and family-friendly borough

Team Doncaster's 'Great 8' Priorities

This project aligns with at least two of Team Doncaster's 'Great 8' priorities.

KEY FINDINGS

There was strong support from both schools and parents and carers for widening FSM eligibility, particularly for **universal provision**.

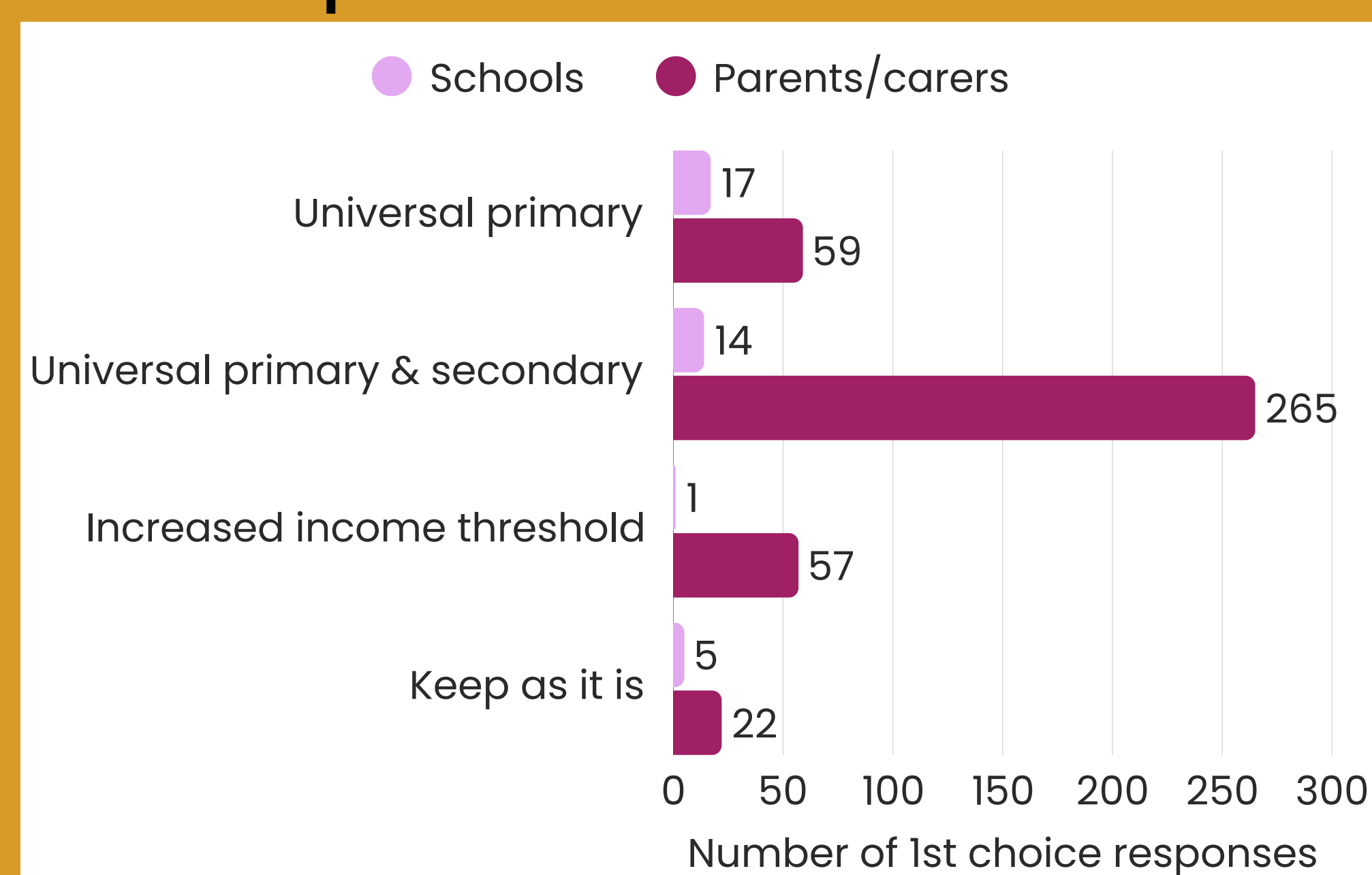


Figure 1. Schools' and parents and carers' preferred choice for FSM provision in Doncaster

The most frequently perceived **positive impacts** of a universal FSM offer were:

- improved access to healthy food
- financial benefits to families
- improved child health.

Key **implementation considerations** for schools included:

- implicated **school finances** (increased staffing/equipment needs)
- impact on **staff time/capacity**.

"Food costs are so high it makes sure children have a meal during the day" - Parent

"Any offer of 'free' meal provision must be carefully costed to ensure it does not rely on schools' main budgets to support delivery" - School

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Findings indicate **substantial support for expanding FSM eligibility** in Doncaster. Planned next steps include **stakeholder focus groups** to inform the development of a feasibility intervention for the 2027-2028 academic year, with implementation across schools in both high- and low-deprivation areas to support assessment and comparison of potential benefits across diverse socioeconomic contexts.

REFERENCES

- Haney, E., Parnham, J. C., Chang, K., Laverty, A. A., Von Hinke, S., Pearson-Stuttard, J., ... & Vamos, E. P. (2023). Dietary quality of school meals and packed lunches: a national study of primary and secondary schoolchildren in the UK. *Public Health Nutrition*, 26(2), 425-436.
- Impact on Urban Health (2024). More than a meal: An independent evaluation of universal primary free school meals for children in London.



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