



Free school meals and auto-enrolment in the North East

Free school meals in the North East

Almost one in three school-aged pupils in the North East are eligible and registered for means-tested free school meals (FSM), the highest proportion of anywhere in England.¹

Whilst all English regions have seen a significant increase in the number and share of children registered for FSMs over the last nine years, the North East has experienced the steepest rise during that period, going from just under one in five of all school-aged pupils (18.4% or 71,358) in 2015/16, to close to one third (31.2% or 124,294) in 2023/24.² These figures – which are markedly higher in several North East local authority areas³ – do not include college students (aged 16-19) entitled to receive free meals in Further Education.

Despite the significant increase in the number of pupils in the region becoming eligible for FSM over the last decade, the North East Child Poverty Commission (NECPC) and Schools North East remain extremely concerned that the current threshold for means-tested FSM (which has been frozen since 2018) is far too low⁴ – based on our research and on ongoing conversations with schools, colleges, children and young people, parents and carers, and local authority/VCS colleagues across the region.⁵ Child Poverty Action Group analysis indicates that some 900,000 children in poverty across England are not eligible for means-tested FSM under the current narrow criteria.⁶

NECPC and Schools North East have therefore long called for free school meals to be expanded at least to all pupils and students in families receiving Universal Credit – at primary, secondary and college – as an immediate priority. This expansion should be included in the forthcoming national child poverty strategy.

Non-registration for free school meals

A further concern is that a not insignificant proportion of pupils and students who **are** eligible under the current FSM threshold are not registered for this support. Whilst the Department for Education appears to have last made an assessment of this non-registration rate over a decade ago (finding in January 2013 that 11% of those eligible were not registered),⁷ Policy in Practice has recently estimated that around 471,000 pupils across England are eligible but not registered for means-tested FSM.⁸

Non-registration means that hundreds of thousands of eligible children and young people may be missing out on the ‘nutritional safety net’ that free school meals provide⁹ – as well as the additional support to which FSM eligibility can act as a ‘gateway’, for example, the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme; support with food costs during school holidays; subsidised or free term-time enrichment activities; and, in some areas, support towards school uniform costs.¹⁰

Non-registration for means-tested FSM also means schools are not receiving the pupil premium funding to which they are entitled, currently worth £1,480 per year for each FSM-registered primary pupil and £1,050 per year for secondary students. In addition, the National Funding Formula for schools in England is, in part, calculated based on the number of pupils eligible for FSMs at each school within the past six years.¹¹

¹ Department for Education (June 2024), [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#)

² NECPC (June 2024), [Almost a third of North East pupils eligible for FSM](#)

³ Ibid

⁴ The current threshold (unchanged since 2018) is a household income of less than £7,400pa after benefits and tax, regardless of family size.

⁵ For example, NECPC (February 2024), [No time to wait: An ambitious blueprint for tackling child poverty in the North East](#)

⁶ Child Poverty Action Group (October 2024), [CPAG's Budget submission](#)

⁷ Answers to Written Parliamentary Questions, for example ([March 2023, UIN 165189](#)) and ([April 2024, UIN 22377](#))

⁸ Policy in Practice (April 2024), [Missing out 2024: £23 billion of support is unclaimed each year](#)

⁹ National Food Strategy; An independent review for Government (July 2021), [National Food Strategy: Part One Recommendations in Full](#)

¹⁰ Education Policy Institute (September 2024), [Under-registration for free school meals in early primary school: How could this be tackled?](#)

¹¹ CPAG, NECPC & Children North East (May 2021) [The cost of missing lunchtime: A briefing on free school meals in the North East of England](#)

Auto-enrolment for free school meals

NECPC and Schools North East have repeatedly called on the Government to address this issue by using the data it already holds across different departments to identify and ensure that *all* families eligible for means-tested FSM are automatically registered for this support, unless they opt-out/object to this happening.¹²

In the absence of Government introducing a national system of FSM auto-enrolment to date – and building on the extensive previous efforts of schools and local authorities across our region to identify and support eligible families to apply – **four North East councils have this year trialled their own opt-out system of auto-enrolment**, joining a number of local authorities across England to learn from the pioneering work of Sheffield City Council on this issue.¹³

Working with local schools and other partners (for example, the [FixOurFood](#) campaign and [Policy in Practice](#)), **FSM auto-enrolment has recently been piloted in Northumberland, County Durham, Middlesbrough, and Redcar and Cleveland** – with Stockton now in the process of implementing a trial, and several other areas in the region, including Darlington and Newcastle, imminently planning to follow.

Across these first four local authorities alone, **an additional 4,000 eligible pupils have been identified and registered for FSM this year** as a result of this work (815 in Northumberland;¹⁴ 2,254 in County Durham; 630 in Middlesbrough and c.300 in Redcar and Cleveland). This has secured **an estimated £5.37million in additional annual pupil premium funding for local schools in these four areas**.

Across these four local authorities, this process has included:

- Using income/benefits-related household data held by the council to identify families who may be eligible for means-tested FSM and cross-referencing this against data held by the local authority and schools willing to be part of this process on pupils already registered (with extensive guidance from councils' legal and information governance teams and, where necessary, DWP agreement);
- Proactively writing to potentially eligible but not registered families, to inform them that their children's eligibility would be formally checked and confirmed for FSM before being automatically enrolled, unless they objected to/opted-out of this happening within a specified timeframe (usually 2-3 weeks). This has included an explanation of the benefits of registering for FSM for children/families and local schools (particularly important where a family may be in receipt of universal infant FSM because of the age of their child(ren), but not registered for means-tested FSM – which means they may be unable to receive the passported support linked to this, and their school will not receive the associated pupil premium funding). Across all four local authorities, a total of just 26 objections/opt-outs have been received from families not wanting to be part of this scheme.

It is evident from this new work in the region that – despite the longstanding efforts of local authorities, schools and other partners – there is a sizeable number of children and young people in the North East eligible for means-tested FSM but unregistered. These auto-enrolment pilots have had significant positive impact, but have required additional time, capacity and valuable resources to be dedicated to this proactive work at a local level, by both councils and schools, which is unnecessary when Government holds the information required to undertake this nationally.

Our ask

The [North East Child Poverty Commission](#) and [Schools North East](#) therefore jointly urge the Government to use the opportunities of the proposed Children's Wellbeing Bill and new national child poverty strategy to implement a national, opt-out system of auto-enrolment for FSM.

This should include students eligible for free meals in Further Education, for whom we know the process of identification and registration can be even more challenging for their colleges.

¹² See, for example, [a joint letter to the Education and DEFRA Secretaries of State](#) (July 2022)

¹³ [Food Foundation, FixOurFood and University of York FSM auto-enrolment webinar](#) (recording published April 2023)

¹⁴ This figure also includes additional pupils registered as part of a wider, awareness-raising campaign.