

**NUTRITIOUS  
AND DELICIOUS  
SCHOOL FOOD:  
The Opportunities  
Free School Meals  
present for the  
West Midlands**

**Evidence Pack**  
Autumn 2023



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### Impact on Urban Health

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### About The Food Foundation

The Food Foundation is an independent charity working to address challenges in the food system in the interests of the UK public. Working at the interface between academia and policymakers (parliamentarians, civil servants, local authorities, business leaders), we use a wide range of approaches to make change happen including events, publications, media stories, social media campaigns and multistakeholder partnerships. We also work directly with citizens to ensure their lived experience is reflected in our policy proposals. We work with many partners on a range of different thematic areas, working closely with academics to generate evidence and campaigners who can drive change. We are independent of all political parties and business, and we are not limited by a single issue or special interest. Visit: [foodfoundation.org.uk](http://foodfoundation.org.uk)

## SUMMARY:

# Why Free School Meals matter and what you can do to help

It is only fair that every child in England has an equal opportunity to learn and to be healthy, no matter where they grow up. **Healthy, tasty, free meals at school provide vital nutrition, helping pupils to concentrate and learn** – and for many of our children and young people, Free School Meals (FSM) may be their main source of hot, nutritious food.

The benefits of FSM are not just seen in the classroom. **FSM has a positive impact well into adulthood, with evidence linking it to improved educational attainment and a variety of social, financial and health benefits** (pp. 6–7). The local economy also gains from a thriving school-food system: serving more meals means employing more staff as well as increasing the demand on local supply chains when school food is locally sourced.

And, in these times of unprecedented financial pressures, **FSM is essential in helping families struggling with mounting bills and food costs**. It is no wonder that FSM expansion is popular with voters and politicians of all political persuasions (pp. 8–9).

In England today, all children in Reception to Year 2 receive a Free School Meal. From Year 3 onwards, however, **a threshold for FSM entitlement comes into force, set at annual household earnings of less than £7,400 (not including benefits and after taxes)**. The FSM criteria in England are the least generous across the UK nations, and are increasingly divergent from Wales and Scotland (where universal provision across all primary schools is being rolled out – see p. 15) and Northern Ireland (where eligibility is set at £14,000 – double the level in England).

This briefing presents key evidence on the benefits of the expansion of Free School Meals, gathered from a range of independent sources, and with case studies of where provision for Free School Meals has been extended locally. It makes the case to local leaders in the West Midlands that investment in school meals makes sense – socially, morally and economically – using examples of what is being shown to be possible elsewhere.

As a result, many local authorities are now taking matters into their own hands. For a year, from this September, Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) for all state-school primary-aged children is being funded across London, which is freeing up some boroughs to provide FSM to older children, too (pp. 12–13). Other local areas are now also extending access, with pilots being set up from York to Stockport (pp. 13–15). But, sadly, not all have the funds or resources to be able to extend provision: there remains a stark postcode lottery for children's access to food across England.

Local leaders in the West Midlands can respond to this urgent need in two ways. First, you can take immediate action to set up an FSM pilot in your local area. Pilots can take different forms, such as a targeted increase of eligibility of universal provision, starting as small as a two-school effort or as big as a city-wide expansion. But for those not able to do this, adding your voice to the call for nationwide expansion is a great way to ensure that long-term provision of Free School Meals reaches every child in your area in the future.

This briefing arms you with everything you need to advocate for Free School Meals, on behalf of the children of the West Midlands and across England.

An astonishing 900,000 children<sup>2</sup> – around 66,000 in the West Midlands Combined Authority alone<sup>2</sup> – are unable to access FSM in England, despite living below the poverty line.

For more information, see also The Food Foundation's evidence pack on The Superpowers of Free School Meals, published in Autumn 2022: [foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/superpowers-free-school-meals-evidence-pack](http://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/superpowers-free-school-meals-evidence-pack)

# The evidence is clear

## Nutritious Free School Meals make children...

### ... healthier

FSM are **healthier than most packed lunches**. Children who have school meals eat more fruit and vegetables<sup>3</sup> – and only 1.6% of packed lunches meet the government's School Food Standards!<sup>4</sup>

Universal FSM can **help to reduce overweight and obesity**. Evidence from four London boroughs showed that the prevalence of obesity was reduced by 9.3% among children in Reception and 5.6% among Year 6 children who received UFSM.<sup>5</sup> This effect seems to be cumulative – in other words, the more years that FSM are available to children at school, the greater the impact on obesity.

The least well-off children are much more likely to be living with overweight or obesity (almost 50%) than the most well-off (30%). FSM is an opportunity to reduce this important health inequality.<sup>6</sup>

The prevalence of Reception-aged children living with obesity in 2021/2 was highest in the West Midlands (11.3%) and the North East (11.4%). It was lowest in the South East (8.7%), South West (8.9%) and East of England (9.2%).

For Year 6, the prevalence of children living with obesity was again highest in the West Midlands (26.2%), the North East (26.6%) and London (25.8%). It was lowest for Year 6 children in the South West (19.8%), the South East (20.0%) and the East of England (21.4%).<sup>7</sup>

*"I am heartened to hear that the London Mayor has decided to provide a school meal to all primary school children in London. This now has to be a priority for all local authorities – we need it especially here in Birmingham and the wider West Midlands. The West Midlands and Birmingham have an extremely high proportion of families living in poverty. Free School Meals would directly address this inequality."*

MATTHEW KNIGHT, CATERING MANAGER AT HILLSTONE PRIMARY SCHOOL, BIRMINGHAM

### ... happier

As of June 2023, 4 million children in the UK live in families experiencing food insecurity – this is over double the number in January 2022.<sup>8</sup> Simply worrying about where food will come from can reduce children's wellbeing.<sup>9</sup> **Children from food-insecure families are also more likely to have mental health problems such as hyperactivity and inattention, and anxiety disorders**<sup>10</sup> – a recent survey of teachers found that over half of teachers felt that children who come to school hungry display anxiety.<sup>11</sup> And it is not just the hungry children who are affected: nearly half of children say they feel upset that some of their peers do not have enough to eat at school.<sup>12</sup>

And a school meal is the best lunch option associated with good mental wellbeing.<sup>13</sup>

### ... perform better at school

A recent survey found that almost nine in ten teachers report that hungry children are often excessively tired, with three-quarters feeling that they may exhibit disruptive behaviour.<sup>14</sup> However, a pilot of Universal Free School Meals (UFSM), reviewed in 2018, suggested that teachers felt that children's readiness for learning, behaviour and concentration all improved when UFSM was available.<sup>15</sup>

Another review of the UFSM pilot also found impacts on academic attainment in the longer term: children on UFSM made between four and eight weeks more progress in maths and English compared to children in similar areas not receiving FSM, with the greatest improvements made by children from less affluent families.<sup>16</sup> This improvement may be due to better health and to being more ready and able to concentrate after eating a nutritious lunch.

## ... and there are financial benefits for children, families and society

**Lifetime income increases.** A detailed economic analysis of Sweden's FSM programme found not only an increase in academic attainment but also a 3% increase in lifetime income for children who had access to FSM during their whole time at primary school.<sup>17</sup> For children from families in the bottom quartile by household income, receiving FSM for nine years increased lifetime income by almost 6%.

**FSM puts money back in families' pockets.** A household in England with two primary-aged children will save at least £37 a month (£450 a year) that would otherwise be spent on school lunch (a figure that will be increasing rapidly in a time of high inflation).

**There are significant returns on investment for society.** It is not expensive to take action: it is expensive NOT to take action:

Another way FSM addresses inequality! The long-term financial benefits are most evident among children from the poorest households, increasing their lifetime income by almost 6%.

A study commissioned by Impact on Urban Health<sup>18</sup> and published in 2022 costed out two different scenarios:

- 1 Expand FSM to all children in England in households on Universal Credit: **Universal Credit (UC) scenario.**
- 2 Expand FSM to all children in England, regardless of household income: **Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) scenario.**

It analysed core benefits to education/employment (such as higher attainment leading to improved employment and earnings) and health/nutrition (including reduced obesity and diet-related diseases in childhood).

### UC scenario

Core benefits over 20 years:  
**£8.9 billion**

Total cost over 20 years:  
**£6.4 billion**

Cost in the first year of provision:  
**£477 million**

Return on every £1 invested:  
**£1.38**

### UFSM scenario

Core benefits over 20 years:  
**£41.3 billion**

Total cost over 20 years:  
**£24.1 billion**

Cost in the first year of provision:  
**£1.8 billion**

Return on every £1 invested:  
**£1.71**

Note: When wider benefits are included – generated above and beyond the core benefits impacting the wider economy and supply chain – the return on investment is likely to be even higher: an additional £16.2 billion will be generated in the economy under the UC scenario and £58.2 billion under the UFSM scenario.

See also The Food Foundation's evidence pack on The Superpowers of Free School Meals (2022): [foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/superpowers-free-school-meals-evidence-pack](https://www.foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/superpowers-free-school-meals-evidence-pack)



# Support for FSM from politicians, the public, teachers and children

The provision of Free School Meals in England has been supported by politicians from all parties – and it is important that this support continues in the run-up to and after the 2024 general election.

*Two-thirds of MPs in Westminster said they support expanding FSM eligibility to all families on Universal Credit*



Universal Infant FSM introduced in 2014 in the Coalition Government



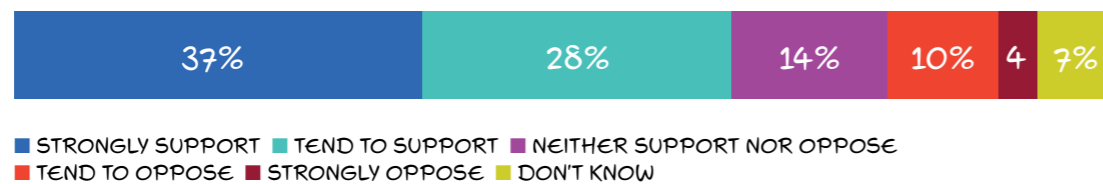
2019 manifestos pledged to introduce FSM for all primary school children and expand entitlement for secondary pupils



Committed to ensure that all school children receive a balanced, nutritious school meal every day, including increased local/organic sourcing

### MPs' support for FSM (Sept/Oct 2022)

Should the government expand Free School Meals eligibility to all school children in England from households in receipt of Universal Credit (or equivalent benefits):



At **local government** level, too, support for FSM is growing. In London, many boroughs had already announced FSM going beyond statutory requirements even before the Mayor announced FSM will be provided for all primary school children for 2023/24 – and there are many examples from other parts of the country. (There is more detail on this on pp. 10–15.)

*'The health and educational benefits of expanding Free School Meals make it clear that this isn't just a welfare measure, it is also an investment in our children and our country's future prosperity'*  
MUNIRA WILSON, LIB DEM MP FOR TWICKENHAM<sup>19</sup>

*'What we can do is extend FSM to every child in a family in receipt of Universal Credit ... Given the scale of the challenge we face and the benefits that it brings ... it seems to me to be a more than worthwhile intervention'*

MICHAEL GOVE, CONSERVATIVE MP AND FORMER SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION<sup>20</sup>



There is very strong **public support** for FSM, with 78% of adults in England in a recent (August 2023) representative poll of 3,000 people saying that they support FSM provision.<sup>21</sup>

(of under £7,400) is inadequate or should not be there at all.

Support for expanding provision holds regardless of political persuasion: 82% of Labour voters and over half (53%) of Conservative voters are in favour of extending Free School Meals immediately to all children receiving Universal Credit, followed by extending it to all school children in the future. The majority of people (70%) think the current threshold

*'I think it's fantastic. I think it's one of the, probably, the best thing the state can do. Because at the end of the day, their children and every child deserves a Free School Meal'*

TORY VOTER, NOW OPEN TO VOTING LABOUR, DERBY NORTH

Support for FSM among **teachers** is not a surprise: 83% of teachers feel that there are children who come to school hungry because their families cannot afford enough food, and that this number has increased in recent months. 85% of teachers think that currently ineligible children would benefit from FSM.<sup>22</sup> Teachers' unions, such as the National Governance Association (NGA), NASUWT and National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) have all supported the call for FSM expansion.<sup>23</sup>

*'We have instances of children coming in with just a small yoghurt or two solitary rashers of bacon in their lunchboxes. It is hard to forget the sight of a child pretending to eat from an empty lunchbox'*

NICK CAPSTICK, OBE, CEO OF THE WHITE HORSE FEDERATION MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST (2022)

**Children** want to eat school meals! Although some children may be reluctant to take their free meal because it can single them out to their peers, this can be tackled by unobtrusive administration and

autoenrollment (as Sheffield is doing, p. 14) or – even better – by removing the income requirement for eligibility entirely and providing FSM for every child.



*'I'm from Birmingham and I have lived experience of food insecurity. The cost-of-living crisis is getting worse, and families are struggling to survive. Giving children one good nutritious meal in school is really important for their wellbeing, for their physical health and for their mental health. Every single child should have access to food, no matter where they live'*

YUMNA HUSEN, 18-YEAR-OLD YOUNG FOOD AMBASSADOR FOR THE CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO FOOD CAMPAIGN AND CHAIR OF BITE BACK

# So many benefits ... let's bring it here!

The short- and long-term benefits of FSM are clear and myriad. But too many children are still missing out on a nutritious Free School Meal. **There are currently an estimated 900,000 children living in poverty who do not currently receive FSM in England and 110,000 in the West Midlands,<sup>24</sup> with around 66,000 in the West Midlands Combined Authority alone.<sup>25</sup>**

And this can be done. **This is a chance for our region to join other trailblazer areas in extending access to Free School Meals.**

In England, all infants (Reception to Year 2) have a Free School Meal. But after this point, families are means tested, with eligibility in primary and secondary school set as low as family earnings of less than £7,400 per year (after tax, not including benefits).

Health, attainment and wellbeing in the West Midlands would benefit enormously if:

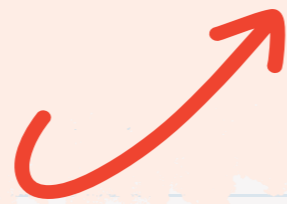
- 1 All children in state-funded schools from families in receipt of Universal Credit (or equivalent benefits) become eligible for a Free School Meal immediately.
- 2 This extension to eligibility is seen as a first step towards providing comprehensively funded, nutritious school food for all children in primary and secondary school.

## What is happening and where?

### Where is Free School Meal extension already a reality?

In February 2023, the Mayor of London made a groundbreaking announcement: from September this year, the Greater London Authority (GLA) will fund all state primary schools in London to offer FSM to every child for a year. In a positive knock-on effect, three of the six London boroughs that had already expanded FSM to all primary pupils – Hammersmith, Islington, Newham, Southwark, Tower Hamlets and Westminster – are able to divert the funding previously used for FSM in their primary schools to reach secondary schools.

Before 2023, no English local authorities outside London had provided Universal FSM for all primary school children – but pilots and initiatives are now launching to respond to needs in different parts of the country. The following case studies show how these local changes are being put in place – in London and beyond.



## LONDON:

### Universal FSM for all children in state-funded primary schools

The extent of both the cost-of-living crisis and the childhood obesity crisis are being clearly and shockingly played out in London.<sup>26</sup> Almost a third of families across the city are living in poverty<sup>27</sup> and over a quarter of children in Year 6 live with obesity<sup>28</sup> – with potentially serious repercussions for education, mental and physical health and wellbeing, and economies. Many of the school children living in poverty do not receive a Free School Meal due to the restrictive eligibility threshold and lack of universal provision in England.

In February 2023, the Mayor of London responded with a city-wide approach, standardising the offer across London.<sup>29</sup> **£130 million of emergency funding has been set aside to expand provision of FSM to all Key Stage 2 children (aged 7–11) in London's state schools for the academic year 2023/4,** funded from higher-than-forecast business rates income.<sup>30</sup> A further £5 million has also been allocated as contingency funding for costs such as access requirements for children with special educational needs and disabilities or with religious dietary requirements.<sup>31</sup> The payments will be made to all boroughs, including those already providing UFSM to this age group. This is the largest rollout of UFSM to take place to date in the UK.

Partnership working is vital to the successful delivery of such an intervention. Boroughs, schools and partners across the city have been, and continue to be, regularly engaged in the implementation of the scheme. The Mayor is funding the price per meal at £2.65, which is above the government's recently increased rate of £2.53 for Universal Infant Free School Meals.

Payment will be made termly in advance, with half paid in summer 2023 to allow for upfront costs. Grant principles request local authorities to comply with the government's School Food Standards, pay staff the London living wage, and to consider sustainability and a 'whole school' approach to healthy eating.<sup>32</sup> There are webinars and resource packs to help schools, head teachers and local authorities to prepare.

The impact of this city-wide initiative will be monitored and evaluated through a multi-strand approach led by funding partners and the GLA. It is expected that not only will the intervention support families through the cost-of-living crisis, but evidence has also shown that take-up of FSM increases among the poorest children when a universal approach is adopted.<sup>33</sup> It is hoped that this evidence-gathering will be useful to bolster calls for UFSM to be extended by national, rather than just local, government in England – something the London Mayor has made clear he supports.

**The extension of FSM should be more than just an emergency measure: its benefits are clear (pp. 6–7). However, The Food Foundation welcomes this one-year intervention, and believes that the priority afforded to FSM by the Mayor of London is indicative of the need for urgent national action to give every school child at least one hot meal a day, so that every child has equal opportunity to learn, grow and thrive.**

Up to  
**287,000**  
more children  
in London will  
receive UFSM in  
2023/24

*"The cost-of-living crisis means families and children across our city are in desperate need of additional support. I have repeatedly urged the Government to provide Free School Meals to help already stretched families, but they have simply failed to act. This is why I'm stepping forward with an emergency £130m scheme that will ensure every single primary pupil in the capital receives Free School Meals. This will save families hundreds of pounds over the year, ensuring parents aren't worrying about how they're going to feed their children"*

SADIQ KHAN, MAYOR OF LONDON <sup>34</sup>





# LONDON BOROUGH



Free Healthy Secondary School Meals will support children from over 1,000 families in 2023/24

## 1 SOUTHWARK: Expanding FSM to all secondary school children from households on Universal Credit

Free School Meals are not new to Southwark. This inner London borough has been providing FSM to all children in primary schools for 10 years, in efforts to tackle high levels of deprivation: 36.2% of children are experiencing poverty.<sup>35</sup>

However, the Mayor of London's announcement that FSM will be funded for all primary school children has freed up Southwark's FSM funding for

2023/24. Southwark Council has decided that £3.2 million will be diverted to free healthy secondary school meals: providing FSM for secondary school children whose parents are currently on Universal Credit. This important, year-long pilot will help to tackle hunger among older children from deprived households during the cost-of-living crisis – and help to build the case for extension of FSM to this age group.<sup>36</sup>

*"As one of the first councils to guarantee a hot, nutritious meal at lunchtime for all primary school children, we know how life-changing they are. The pilot programme in secondary schools will run during the 2023/24 academic year, alongside the Mayor of London's programme in primary schools"* COUNCILLOR KIERON WILLIAMS, LEADER OF SOUTHWARK COUNCIL<sup>37</sup>

## 2 TOWER HAMLETS: Expanding FSM to all secondary school children

Recent statistics suggest that Tower Hamlets has the highest proportion of children experiencing poverty of any borough in the country – 47.5% in 2021/2 – slightly higher than Birmingham on 46.4%.<sup>38</sup> The positive approach being taken by the local authority to providing FSM is an important way to redress this inequality and improve the life chances of children in the borough.

Universal FSM for every child in primary school has been in place since 2014, providing around 16,500 meals a day at around 60 schools and nurseries. This is now being extended to all secondary school pupils up to the age of 16, with a phased rollout in three stages, beginning in September 2023. By April

2024, all 38,000 pupils in the borough's state schools will have access to a Free School Meal<sup>39</sup> – and this is estimated to provide a saving of £550 per year per child to families.

Feasibility surveys were carried out in schools prior to the announcement of the policy, and the policy is being phased in to enable schools to better prepare for the significant increase in school meal provision. The Council's 2023/24 budget includes £5.7 million to enable this extension to all secondary school pupils.

*"There are a number of financial, health and academic benefits to providing Universal Free School Meals, which is why this policy is a priority for the council... I am delighted that secondary school pupils and their families will now be able to reap the same rewards as our primary school pupils"* LUTFUR RAHMAN, MAYOR OF TOWER HAMLETS<sup>40</sup>

An additional 8,500 secondary school children up to age 16 will have access to FSM, rolling out from 2023

## 3 WESTMINSTER: Expanding FSM into secondary school and early years

Westminster is also taking advantage of the money freed up by the Mayor's announcement. The Council has provided FSM for every primary-aged child in state schools since January 2023 – and £2 million of reallocated funding is available to extend this to more age groups, for the duration of the GLA funding. All three- and four-year-olds across all early years settings and every child who is resident in Westminster and is in Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14) will now have access to FSM, and two-year-olds who currently access the Free Early Education Entitlement will also receive targeted help.<sup>41</sup>

*"We want to take some pressure away from families at a time when we know they are already struggling. Some parents go without to fill a lunchbox with whatever is left in the cupboard – however meagre – to ensure their child has something to eat at school. It cannot be right that children in one of the richest cities on Earth are being left to make do with scraps. We need to see equality built into the system for future generations"*

ADAM HUG, LEADER OF WESTMINSTER COUNCIL<sup>42</sup>

From 2023 onwards, over 1,300 additional children who are both resident in Westminster and at Key Stage 3 (secondary school) will have access to FSM as well as almost 2,000 in early years settings.

### HARINGEY

Haringey Council has expanded FSM to the most-in-need groups of children in Years 3–6 who were not eligible for support under the government scheme. This includes children living in temporary accommodation, council housing or social housing, and children from families who claim Discretionary Housing Payments. A discretionary fund was allocated to schools to assist families temporarily in financial need. From April 2021 to April 2023, this expanded provision has allowed as many as 790 extra children to receive FSM.<sup>43</sup>

# BEYOND LONDON

The Food Foundation is delighted that more councils around England are responding to local needs and are extending FSM to more children, even if financial constraints mean that Universal FSM is currently out of reach.

## STOCKPORT: Expanding FSM to children in primary and secondary education from low-income families

Stockport Council is prioritising the extension of FSM to many more children from low-income families, beyond those already eligible under the current system in England.

This commitment means that for a year, from September 2023, every child whose family is in receipt of local council tax support and/or housing

3,000 more children in primary and secondary school and college to have access to FSM for one school year (2023/24)



benefit will be able to have a Free School Meal. This applies to all children from Stockport aged 7–18 who are at school, college or other further education – and includes local children who go to school outside the borough. Families who are entitled to FSM have been identified and invited to confirm that they would like to take up the offer.<sup>44</sup>

*'This is a huge programme for our borough and I'm proud to be a part of a council making this possible'*

COUNCILLOR JILLY JULIAN, CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND RESOURCES, STOCKPORT COUNCIL<sup>45</sup>

## YORK:

### Piloting an FSM expansion to schools in deprived areas

City of York Council is taking a different approach to the funding of FSM.<sup>46</sup> Mobilising York to provide Universal FSM for every primary school child was one of Labour's local election promises and, as a first step towards this, efforts are being made to target the most deprived schools in the city. However, rather than providing all the money from public funds, £100,000 has been contributed by the local authority, with a city-wide campaign, launching in October 2023, to raise the rest of

*'It's a great opportunity to bring people together to do something positive for the city, for people who really need it. The educational benefits are absolutely beyond doubt: for a child to be able to sit in class all day and be able to learn, they need to be well fed'*

CLAIRE DOUGLAS, LEADER, YORK COUNCIL<sup>47</sup>

the funds from businesses, organisations and individuals. The money would be put into a fund that will then be administered by a local charity experienced in fund management and disbursement.

primary school in York, which is in Chapelfields, one of the most deprived parts of the city. At a smaller primary school, breakfast will be provided – and the results compared. Which schools receive the meals first is partly dependent on the capacity of their kitchens to cook the greater number of meals – the Chapelfields school has recently had its kitchen updated, and the second primary school has an older kitchen – and the hope is to learn lessons about obstacles to extending FSM. Further expansion of the scheme is planned, subject to funding: the aim is to reach ten schools in a year's time.

The first free meals are expected to be provided in two schools from January 2024. Free lunch will be provided (at a rate of £2.87 per meal) at the largest

Over 650 children aged 3–11 in two of the most deprived schools to have access to FSM starting in January 2024

## SHEFFIELD:

### Improving access through automatically awarding FSM to eligible children

As well as actively extending eligibility for FSM, there are ways to improve access for children who have the right to a free meal but have not yet taken it up. Enrolling children automatically, rather than requiring registration by parents, is a win–win for children and schools: children receive a nutritious meal, and schools receive more Pupil Premium funding (this is attached to every pupil registered for FSM).

6,400 additional eligible children were registered between 2016 and 2022, and an extra £3.8 million was awarded in Pupil Premium funding to schools.

6,400 additional children have been identified and registered for FSM

This has been Sheffield City Council's approach since 2016, using a series of measures to ensure that registration is as high as possible. A data-matching exercise is run (using pupil records and housing benefit data) to identify children who might be entitled to FSM.<sup>48</sup> As a result of these processes,

Other local authorities are also now looking at ways to improve their FSM registration processes, including the introduction of 'opt-out' mechanisms and improved automation. And FixOurFood, led by the University of York, is evaluating and supporting implementation of auto-enrolment processes across Yorkshire.<sup>49</sup>

## SOUTHAMPTON

Swaythling Primary School in Southampton is now providing FSM for all children from families receiving Universal Credit. The school already has a high number of children on FSM, but an additional 15 families have benefited from the scheme. This costs £8,000 a year and is paid by an individual donor.<sup>50</sup>

*'For some families, it will be the only hot meal that a child is getting throughout the day'*

MR DRAPER, HEAD TEACHER

## BATH AND NORTHEAST SOMERSET

The St John's Foundation, a local charity, is supporting seven primary schools in Bath and Northeast Somerset to cover the cost of children not entitled to FSM to have a hot lunch each day until July 2024. The charity has also provided funds for additional infrastructure and upgrades to kitchens. As a result, over 700 more children will have the opportunity to access FSM.<sup>51</sup>

# THE DEVOLVED NATIONS:

## FSM extension to all primary school children

### SCOTLAND

All children in years P1–P3 (ages 5–7) have received a Free School Meal since 2015. In a welcome announcement in 2020, the Scottish Government committed to extending this to every primary school child.<sup>52</sup>

The first extension (to year P4) took place in August 2021, with uptake of over 80%, with a further extension (to year P5) in January 2022. Rollout to the remaining two years (P6 and P7) is currently on hold to allow capital and revenue funding issues to be addressed, but the Scottish Government has committed to have Universal FSM in place for every primary pupil.

There are currently no plans to extend FSM to more secondary school pupils in Scotland, although there remains a commitment to run pilots around how this can be delivered. However, Scotland's income cap for FSM is slightly higher than that in England: a family on

Universal Credit must earn (net of tax) no more than £7,920 a year, compared with £7,400 in England and Wales, if their child is to receive FSM.

All 389,000 primary school children to have access to FSM.

### WALES

The rollout of Universal Free School Meals in primary schools was announced in Wales in December 2021 as part of the Co-operation Agreement between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru. Every primary school child (over 272,000 in 2021<sup>53</sup>) and more than 6,000 nursery-age pupils attending a maintained school will be eligible for FSM by 2024. £260 million has been committed over three years and in the academic year 2022/23, 5 million extra meals had already been served.

Universal FSM is being phased in over three years: by April 2023, most Welsh local authorities were offering it to every child in Reception through Year 2, with rollout to Years 3 and 4 beginning in September 2023 and Years 5 and 6 in April 2024. Work is being carried out in many primary schools to ensure that kitchens can provide school meals to a significantly greater number of children:<sup>54</sup> £60 million of the funding provided is capital funding for local authorities to improve school kitchen facilities and update digital systems.<sup>55</sup>

All primary school and nursery-age children – almost 280,000 children – to have access to FSM by 2024



# Making this a reality in the West Midlands Combined Authority

## Who will this help?

Extending FSM would make a difference to the lives of children across the West Midlands, improving their health and bolstering their chances to succeed in school and beyond.

- » There are currently around 66,000 children in state primary and secondary schools in the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) region whose families are living in poverty but who are missing out on Free School Meals.<sup>56</sup>
- » The estimated annual cost of extending FSM to all children on Universal Credit to ensure no child living in poverty misses out would be £40 million.<sup>57</sup>
- » In addition, the estimated annual cost of providing Universal FSM to every state primary and secondary school child in the WMCA region, with all the benefits that this entails (see pp. 6–7) would be £132 million.<sup>58</sup>

FSM addresses health inequalities in our region in a fair, targeted way, ensuring that all our children get the best possible start.

## What can you do as a local leader in the West Midlands?

Many councils are already taking action to ensure that as many school children as possible eat at least one hot meal a day through providing Free School Meals – and this is warmly welcomed and encouraged. However, councils operate in different environments and with different levels of resource in different parts of the country. This is why The Food Foundation and many other campaigners are urging the government to extend Free School Meals to all children and young people in England, a policy with wide-ranging and costed benefits (p. 7).

**So, what can local leaders in the West Midlands do who want to support the call for FSM? The Food Foundation suggests two key steps:**

### 1 SET UP A FREE SCHOOL MEAL PILOT IN YOUR LOCAL AREA

There are many different ways to do this and different models on which to draw (pp. 10–15), from targeting children from families on Universal Credit to (where possible) providing FSM to every child. Evidence drawn from local pilots is also vital in building the case to extend FSM nationwide.

### 2 ADVOCATE FOR EXTENDING FREE SCHOOL MEALS NATIONALLY

Adding your voice to the call for nationwide extension is the best way to ensure that long-term FSM provision reaches children in your area, along with every child in the country.

Local authority	Number of children living in poverty missing out on FSMs in WMCA*
Birmingham	30,000
Coventry	8,000
Dudley	7,000
Sandwell	9,000
Solihull	2,000
Walsall	6,000
Wolverhampton	4,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>66,000</b>

\*Estimated and rounded to nearest 1000.

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# The Food Foundation

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