

14th March 2024



Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP
Minister of State
Department for Education

Dear Minister

Free School Meal Auto-Enrolment

We are writing to ask that the government acts now to ensure all children who are entitled to Free School Meals (FSMs) are able to receive them. This is sadly not currently the case, and we are deeply concerned that up to 250,000 children living in the most deprived households are missing out on their statutory right to a daily hot nutritious free school meal. Schools too, miss out on FSM proxy funding, such as the Pupil Premium.

According to your own department figures, 11% of pupils entitled to FSMs are not registered to receive them. More recent analysis undertaken by the Child Poverty Action Group in 2021 in the North East of England also found the same rates of under-registration at regional level.

We know from speaking with families that there are several reasons for this under-registration rate, including burdensome and complex administration, uncertainty around the entitlement criteria, language or literacy issues, and a feeling of stigma or embarrassment from families. Schools and councils work hard under the current FSM registration system which is regularly described as cumbersome, and financially and administratively inefficient.

Over the last year, a small number of councils have adopted a new FSM process using an 'opt-out / right to object' model. This involves identifying families through existing datasets and writing to parents to inform them their children will be automatically registered unless they opt-out. Results have been impressive and opt-out rates are extremely low. For example, FixOurFood research has pooled data from 5 local authorities in England who implemented FSM auto-enrolment processes in October 2023. Results suggested that over 2,500 additional children had been registered to receive free school meals, bringing in over £4.5million in additional school funding. Wakefield City Council alone registered an additional 1,183 children through the opt-out model.

We applaud this innovative work at council level, and we hope that your departments will encourage and support councils to adopt this new model in time for the October schools census. However, this process is resource intensive for councils and families still fall through the gaps as access to datasets is patchy.



But most worryingly, the new process has highlighted that existing FSM registration processes jars against the public sector equalities duty. For example, in Lambeth, 89% of newly identified pupils came from lone parent households, 59% came from households with English as an Additional Language, and 79% from Black, Asian and Multi-Ethnic backgrounds (compared to 66% of the school population). This suggests that the existing FSM registration system acts as a barrier to certain minoritised groups accessing their entitlement, deepening inequalities rather than tackling them.

As a matter of urgency, we call on the government to:

- Commit to introducing a revised Free School Meal registration process so that all children entitled are automatically registered
- In the interim, promote and support local authorities to implement the 'opt-out/right to object' FSM model
- Provide datasets to each council to show the current levels of under-registration, by combining relevant DfE and DWP datasets.

It is grossly unfair that up to 250,000 of our country's most vulnerable children are missing out on their statutory right to a free school meal, and we urge you to act.

Yours sincerely

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| Dr Nicholas Capstick OBE- Chair of the School Food Review Group |
| Myles Bremner, CEO, Bremner & Co |
| Baroness Rosie Boycott, House of Lords |
| Maria Bryant, Professor of Public Health Nutrition, FixOurFood, University of York |
| Andrew Forsey, National Director, Feeding Britain |
| Ali Morpeth (RNutr) Chair Food & Nutrition, Children's Alliance |
| Anna Taylor, Executive Director, The Food Foundation |
| Stephanie Slater, Founder/Chief Executive, School Food Matters |
| James Toop, CEO Bite Back |
| Naomi Duncan, Chief Executive, Chefs in Schools. |
| Louise Foreman and Nikita Sinclair, Interim Heads of Children's Health and Food Programme, Impact on Urban Health |



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| Anita Brown, National Chair, LACA - the school food people |
| Barbara Crowther, Children's Food Campaign Manager, Sustain |
| Dan Paskins, Director of UK Impact, Save the Children UK |
| Cllr. Bob Webb, Executive Member for Children, Young People and Education, City of York Council |
| Cllr Ben Kind, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, London Borough of Lambeth |
| Cllr Sarah Ruiz, Cabinet Lead Member for Children's Social Care and Education, Newham Council |
| Cllr Sarah Ruiz, Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care and Education, London Borough of Newham |
| Ruth Galpine, Associate Director Healthy & Sustainable Diets, Soil Association |
| Daniel Kebede, General Secretary, National Education Union |
| Geoff Barton, General Secretary, ASCL |
| Paul Whiteman, General Secretary, NAHT, School Leadership Union |
| Ben Gadsby, Head of Policy and Research, Impetus |
| Mike Short, National Secretary, UNISON |
| Simon Hawking, CEO, Acts Trust |
| Dr Shamila Wanninayake, Royal College of GPs |
| Dr Lindsey MacDonald, Chief Executive, Magic Breakfast |
| Hannah Cooper, Research and Campaigns Manager, Citizens Advice Newcastle |
| Jane James, Managing Director, Little Voices |
| Jason Strelitz, Director of Public Health, Newham Council |
| Erkan Demirbas, Senior Lecturer, University of Lincoln |
| David Fryer, Head of Welfare & Benefits, Leeds City Council |
| Sam Phillips, Operations Director, Chefs In Schools |
| Professor Greta Defeyter, Director of the Healthy Living Lab, Northumbria University |
| Dayna Brackley, Senior Food Policy Consultant, Bremner & Co |
| Lyle Barker - Policy Officer, The Children's Society |
| Zoe Griffiths, Registered Nutritionist (Public Health), ZG Nutrition |
| Dr Gurbinder Singh Lalli, Reader in Education for Social Justice, University of Wolverhampton |
| Aliya Porter, Registered Nutritionist, Porter Nutrition |
| Laura Stratford, Coordinator, the Greater Lincolnshire Food Partnership |
| Sarah Chisholm, Public Health Officer, East Riding of Yorkshire Council |
| Becky Greenwood, Public Health Practitioner, Calderdale council |
| Sarah Cavanagh, Manager - Services to Schools (Inc. FSM), Children's Service, Education & Skills, Sheffield City Council |
| Annabel Bates, Director of Education, London Borough of Newham |



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| Colin Cox, Director of Public Health and Communities, Cumberland Council |
| Brad Pearce, Managing Director, CATERed |
| Helena Houghton, Executive Director, Royal Academy of Culinary Arts Adopt a School |
| Paul Wright FFPH FRSPH PH Affairs Partner |
| Professor Peter Jackson, co-Director: Institute for Sustainable Food, University of Sheffield |
| Carlos Yescas, Coordinator, Food Newcastle |
| Mark Adams, Director of Public Health for Middlesbrough and Redcar & Cleveland; Middlesbrough Council and Redcar & Cleveland Council |
| Chris Cooke, Mayor of Middlesbrough; Middlesbrough Council |
| Cllr Philippa Storey, Deputy Mayor of Middlesbrough, Middlesbrough Council |
| Andrew Cowan - Senior Operations Manager - Bury Council |
| Rob Brown, Director of Education & Partnerships; Middlesbrough Council |
| Cllr Ursula Earl, Lead Member for Health, Welfare & Housing; Redcar & Cleveland Council |
| Ferhat Bano, Senior Manager, Kirklees Council |
| Clare Hanna, Group H&S Manager, Impact Food Group Ltd |
| Angie Row - St Mark's Meals |
| Anna Route, Development Officer, Hull Food Partnership |
| Leigh Elliott, Chief Executive, Children North East |
| Chris Zarraga, Director, Schools North East |
| Michele Deans, Interim Chair, North East Child Poverty Commission |
| Charlotte Pickles, Public Health Specialist, Blackburn with Darwen |
| Valerie Ayre, Chair, Food Cumberland Partnership |
| Gemma McManus, Centre Manager- the lookout community hub, Carlisle/ localLay minister at barnabas and St Luke's church Carlisle (church of England) |
| Mary Bradley, Chair, CALC. |
| Sarah King, Food Policy student City, University of London |
| Helen Esslemont, Community Development Officer, Cumberland Council |
| Bobby Forbes, MYP for Cumberland |
| Anna Todd, Participation Officer, Cumberland |
| Hannah Gill, Manager, The Rock Youth Project |
| Johnny Denis, Coordinator, Eastbourne Food Partnership |
| Niall McNulty, trainer, Valued Voices |
| James Burke, CEO, Brampton and Beyond Community Trust |
| Joanne crowe. Executive Director, Phoenix Enterprise Centre |
| Ged Pickersgill ' Business Development Manager ' The Wel'l Communities CIC |



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| Darren Kelton |
| Eric Bryant, Carlisle Foodbank Trustee and retired teacher. |
| Kate Jensen , Centre Manager, Wigton Youth Station |
| Caroline Lunny, Manager, Oasis Food Pantry |
| Carni Mc Carron-Holmes |
| Christine Bowditch, Chair, Carlisle Mencap |
| Shelley Hewitson, Chief Officer, Citizens Advice Copeland |
| Donald Mackay . Leader. Hebron Church |
| Matthew Stemp, Community Development Worker, Crosslacon Parish, Church of England |
| Bridget Johns, District Manager Cumblerand, Cumbria CVS |
| Jenny Benson, Director of Programmes & Partnerships, Cumbria Community Foundation |
| Dan Rodgers, Engagement officer, CVS |
| Victoria Chilvers, Income Team Leader, Castles & Coasts HA |
| Alison Phillips |
| Susan O'Neill, Community Development Officer, Cumberland Council |
| Tara Edwards, Chief Officer, Citizens Advice Allerdale |
| Caroline Parry-Jones, Centre Coordinator, The Oval Centre |
| Nikki Bates, Development Manager, Whitehaven Egremont and District Credit Union |
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| Lynsey Barraclough, PhunkyFoods Project Manager, Purely Nutrition Ltd |
| Ken Messenger - Pastoral Support Facilitator - Cumberland Council |
| Maureen McCartney, Senior Finance Officer, Cumbria CVS |
| Catherine Clarke Holiday Activity and Food Programme Cumberland and Westmorland and Furness |
| Guy Thompson, HAF Project Officer, Cumberland Council |
| Rob Oxley, Research Trainee, University of York |
| Karen Alexander, Welfare Team Manager , LB Haringey |
| Elaine Lewis, Library Outreach Project Officer, Cumberland Council |
| Andrea Sharp, Income Management Officer, Westfield Housing Association |
| Antony Lamb, Administrator, Carlisle Community Help |
| Bethan Wilson, Resettlement Officer, CCC |
| Rebecca Batstone |
| Joelle Raby, Church youth and young families worker, King's Church Cockermouth |
| Chelsea Kay, Volunteer Development Office, Cumbria CVS |
| Sarah Pearce, Administrator Cumbria CVS |



Fiona Kerr, North Lakes Foodbank Manager (North Lakes Foodbank)

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Tina Knight, Senior Client Service manager. Home Group Limited

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