



## PRESS RELEASE

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00:01 THURSDAY 14<sup>th</sup> MARCH

### **Charities and Councils write to Minister as outdated opt-in system means 250,000 eligible children miss out on free school meals and schools lose millions of much needed funding**

- On International School Meals Day (14 March 2024) charities and local councils send letter to Schools Minister calling for introduction of auto-enrolment for all children eligible for free school meals.
- Currently up to 250,000 children living in some of most deprived households in England are not receiving the daily hot nutritious free school meal that they have a right to.
- Evidence from one local authority trialing auto-enrolment shows children from lone parent households, households with English as an additional language, and children from Black, Asian and multi-ethnic backgrounds were most likely to not be signed up.
- A [new research study](#) launched by the Children's Food Campaign today has also revealed that 8 in 10 (81%) parents support automatic registration for free school meals for all entitled pupils, instead of the current application system.

**Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> March 2024** - Today, on International School Meals Day, a letter co-ordinated by the School Food Review, Bremner&Co and The Food Foundation and signed by 130 representative from charities, councils and academia including the NEU, CPAG and Feeding Britain, has been sent to Schools Minister, Damian Hinds, calling on the government to act now to ensure all children who are entitled to Free School Meals (FSM) are able to receive them. Currently up to [250,000 children](#) living in some of the most deprived households are missing out on their statutory right to a daily hot nutritious free school meal, with reasons including administrative barriers and language issues.

Evidence from Fix Our Food, one of the signatories of the letter, shows local authorities are taking matters into their own hands to test opt-out systems, including Wakefield, Lewisham and Lambeth. The results suggest that the current FSM registration process could be

entrenching inequality in schools. For example, in Lambeth, 89% of pupils newly registered for FSM 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).

Local authorities using an opt-out rather than an opt-in system to receive FSM report opt-out rates as low as under 1%. This compares to the Department for Education's own figures showing 11% of pupils entitled to FSM are not registered to receive them under its scheme. The charities and councils cite complex administration, language or literacy issues and fear of stigma as some of the reasons for this.

With [20% of households with children in the UK experiencing food insecurity](#) in January 2024, the need for FSM to lighten the financial burden on families struggling with the cost of living crisis remains urgent.

Pupil premium funding is also given to schools in England for each primary pupil (£1,455 per year) and secondary pupil (£1,035 per year) who have been eligible for FSM at any point in the last six years. This means schools are missing out on this extra funding if eligible pupils are not signed up to FSM.

Research from FixOurFood has pooled data from 5 local authorities in England which implemented FSM auto-enrolment in October 2023. Results suggested that over 2,500 additional children had been registered to receive free school meals as a result of auto-enrolment, bringing in over £4.5million in additional school funding. Wakefield City Council alone registered an additional 1,183 children through the opt-out model.

**As a matter of urgency, the letter calls on National 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

Currently, outside of London, only children from households with an income below £7,400 a year (after tax, before benefits) are entitled to FSM; a threshold that has not increased since 2018. This is despite inflation and price rises. The Food Foundation and School Food Review are also calling on politicians across the spectrum to extend access to Free School Meals to all school children, with the first step being to immediately target children from families receiving Universal Credit.

This call is backed by [new data](#) from the Children’s Food Campaign today showing 9 in 10 parents (89%) want to see immediate expansion of free school meals to every child living in poverty and more than 7 in 10 parents (75%) would like all children of all ages to have access to a free school meal, regardless of their background.

**Shona Goudie, Policy and Advocacy Manager, The Food Foundation, said,** “We are extremely concerned that the opt-in system for free school meals is disproportionately impacting minority groups and further entrenching inequalities. Currently the administration to sign up is complex and burdensome and families can face language or literacy issues when trying to navigate the system. Free school meals are intended to provide a nutritional safety net for the poorest in society, but currently due to inefficient administration by national policymakers they are not reaching those who need them most.

“Auto-enrolment should go hand in hand with increasing eligibility so that the 900,000 children living in poverty in England who are not currently eligible for free school meals are also able to benefit from a healthy, nutritious meal at school.”

**Prof Maria Bryant, University of York, Fix our Food** "Early evidence from our evaluation in areas that have launched auto-enrolment processes is already showing substantial impact on the numbers of additional children now entitled to free school meals and on the funding that this provides to schools. Local authorities are committed to doing what’s best for their families, but, in our interviews, we are learning that the process takes a lot of time to implement. We will continue to gather this data to support decision making, particularly around the call for centralised auto-enrolment processes”

**Myles Bremner, CEO, [Bremner & Co](#):** “There are far too many hoops that parents, schools and councils must go through just to be able to make sure that a child can receive a free school meal. Poor government policy and administration is to blame. This can be easily fixed – and doing so will be a triple bonus. It means our most vulnerable children can eat a free, hot nutritious meal. It will save hard-up parents money that can be used for other vital things. And it means that schools get the critical extra funding that government has allocated – to help our most disadvantaged children do well in school”.

**ENDS**

**FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT**

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**NOTES TO EDITOR**

## AVAILABLE FOR INTERVIEW

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## SOCIAL MEDIA

Twitter: [@Food\\_Foundation](#)

Instagram: [food.foundation](#)

## ABOUT THE FOOD FOUNDATION

[The Food Foundation](#) is an independent charity working to influence food policy and business practice, shaping a sustainable food system which makes healthy diets affordable and accessible for all. We work in partnership with researchers, campaigners, community bodies, industry, investors, government and citizens to galvanise the UK's diverse agents of change, using surprising and inventive ideas to drive fundamental shifts in our food system. These efforts are based on the continual re-evaluation of opportunities for action, building and synthesising strong evidence, convening powerful coalitions, harnessing citizens' voices and delivering impactful communications. We are independent of all political parties and businesses, and we are not limited by a single issue or special interest Visit: [www.foodfoundation.org.uk](http://www.foodfoundation.org.uk)

### About the School Food Review Group

The [School Food Review](#) is a coalition of 30 organisations spanning charities, educational organisations, catering companies, unions and academics, committed to working together to improve children's health by reforming the school food system.

Visit: [www.schoolfoodmatters.org/school-food-review](http://www.schoolfoodmatters.org/school-food-review)

### About Bremner and Co

[Bremner & Co](#) is an independent food policy and practice consultancy. We work with charities and public sector organisations to make the food system fairer. We are a proud partner in the FixOurFood FSM auto-enrolment project, as well as support the coordination of the national School Food Review.

### About Fix our Food

FixOurFood is a 5-year research programme led by the University of York and is part of the 'Transforming the UK Food System for Healthy People and a Healthy Environment Strategic Priorities Fund Programme' which is delivered by UKRI. FixOurFood has a vision to transform food systems across the UK towards being 'regenerative'. FixOurFood is working in schools and nurseries to transform food menus, environments, education and procurement. FixOurFood is evidence-based and is committed to all young people having a voice in the future of the UK food system. [www.fixourfood.org](http://www.fixourfood.org).

For more information on the [new data](#) published today from the Children's Food Campaign please contact Children's Food Campaign Manager [barbara@sustainweb.org](mailto:barbara@sustainweb.org) Telephone 07753 837945