

Briefing: Auto-enrol children onto Free School Meals

SUMMARY

Approximately 11% of eligible children are missing out on their statutory right to a free school meal.

Free school meals ensure children are guaranteed the right to at least one hot, healthy meal a day. There is strong evidence that good school food is not just an anti-poverty measure, but can boost children's health, education, attendance and future earnings.

Opportunities currently exist to introduce auto-enrolment through legislation, either in amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill or through the Private Members Bill, tabled by Peter Lamb MP, due to have its second reading on 14 March.

This should be seen as a first step towards expanding entitlement for free school meals to more children to ensure that no child misses out on a hot, nutritious meal at school every day.

Entitled children are missing out on Free School Meals:

- According to the most recent available government figures, [up to 250,000 \(11%\) of entitled children](#) are missing out on their statutory right to a free school meal. (This is in addition to 900,000 children living in poverty but not qualifying for free school meals – see [here](#) for more information).
- There are several reasons for the under-registration rate:
 - o Parents may struggle to fill out complex forms
 - o Language barriers of parents
 - o Lack of awareness of free School meal entitlement
 - o Stigma or embarrassment
- The current registration system is regularly described by schools and local authorities as cumbersome, and financially and administratively inefficient.

Receiving statutory benefits should be easy and straightforward for people who are entitled. It is not fair that that poor administration fails to give families an essential nutritional safety net.

The cost:

- As a statutory scheme, funding for all entitled children should already be available.

The benefits of auto-enrolment:

Benefits to the child from getting a nutritious, filling lunch:

- **Reduced food insecurity:** in June 2024 [18% of households with children](#) reported experiencing food insecurity. Free school meals assure children one hot meal per day and take significant pressure off family budgets.
- **Improved children's nutrition and health:** School meals should guarantee that children receive a nutritious meal. [Fewer than 2%](#) of packed lunches meet School Food Standards.
- **Increased attainment, attendance and earning potential:** Hungry children struggle to learn. [Research from Sweden](#) has found that pupils who receive free school meals earn an extra 3% on average over their lifetimes – rising to 6% among the poorest.
- **Wider benefits to the child:** Unregistered families also miss out on other free school meal dependent benefits, such as the Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF) and uniform grants.

Benefits to schools:

- Schools miss out on much needed Pupil Premium Funding worth up to £1,455 per pupil.

Reducing inequalities:

- Early findings from areas that [Fix Our Food](#) are working with show that children from non-white communities or lone parent households are more likely to not be registered for free school meals despite being entitled.
- The Greater London Authority has put resources into promoting auto-enrolment. While this is positive for London, the same level of support is not available for most children in the rest of England.

Why a local council led approach is not the solution:

- The [Fix Our Food](#) research programme is supporting over 77 councils to implement local 'opt-out / right to object' approaches to free school meal registration – a localised version of auto-enrolment. It is helping councils to identify and write to entitled (but unregistered) families, bringing together existing datasets to inform them their children will be automatically registered unless they opt-out.
- Thousands of newly identified children have been successfully registered. Opt-out rates are extremely low.
- However, [so far only a few councils have successfully adopted this new process](#). Obtaining data-sharing agreements is difficult and fraught with legal concerns. Entitled families drop through the gaps as access to datasets is patchy. Further, this process is resource intensive, incurring additional and onerous governance and administration at council and school level.

How can Free School Meal auto-enrolment be done?

Free School Meal auto-enrolment would register entitled families to receive free school meals using benefits data, unless families decide to opt out. This requires data-sharing between the Department for Work & Pensions (who hold data that identifies children who are entitled) and the Department of Education (who administer the free school meal registration scheme).

Our recommendations are:

- The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill should introduce auto-enrolment for free school meals to ensure all those who are entitled are registered.
- While national processes are being set up, the Government should instigate collaborative working across local government agencies to promote and support local council approaches.

Wider school food improvements

Ultimately all children, regardless of background, must be provided with a good quality free school meal. To achieve this, we are calling for three key policy changes to school food:

- Introduce auto-enrolment for free school meals to ensure all those who are entitled are registered to receive them.
- Extend eligibility thresholds for free school meals (currently set at £7,400 annual household income before benefits) to all children, with an immediate first step of extending eligibility to all families in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent benefits, to ensure the 900,000 children living in poverty but missing out can benefit from a nutritious lunch every school day.
- Introduce a school food accountability framework which includes updating and monitoring of the School Food Standards to ensure that the food provided is nutritious and promotes health.