

17 December 2024

Dear Secretaries of State

Introduction of Free School Meal Auto-Enrolment in the Children's Wellbeing Bill

We are writing as representatives of local authorities, schools, charities and universities to press the opportunity to use the upcoming Children's Wellbeing Bill to enable all children who are entitled to a free school meal to get a hot and nutritious meal at lunchtime by introducing auto-enrolment of Free School Meals.

Despite significant efforts by many councils, too many children in the most deprived households are still not receiving their statutory Free School Meal. Estimates indicate that as many as [470,000 children in England](#) who meet the government's criteria to qualify are missing out on a daily hot nutritious meal. This is in addition to 900,000 children living in poverty but not qualifying for the scheme. The poor registration levels of Free School Meals also means that many schools are missing out on much needed Pupil Premium funding due to the use of Free School Meals as a passport.

Families face multiple barriers that contribute to this under-registration rate, including the burdensome application process, uncertainty around the entitlement criteria, language or literacy issues, and a feeling of stigma or embarrassment.

Over the past two years, the FixourFood programme has supported a growing number of councils to adopt an 'opt-out / right to object' model of registration using existing datasets to identify entitled children, and then informing parents that their children will be automatically registered unless they opt-out. Where this has been successfully introduced, there have been minimal opt-out rates meaning more children have had access to a free school lunch. This shows the popularity of such a system and great success has been achieved in many previously unregistered children gaining access to a much-needed, free, nutritious lunch at school. However, many local authorities have struggled to introduce the system despite their best efforts.

The [Fix Our Food](#) research program has been working with 66 local authorities to implement such a model, but progress has been hindered by data sharing challenges at the local authority level and the huge resource that is required by already over-stretched councils. In some cases, councils have even been threatened with legal action. Furthermore, this approach places a considerable administrative burden on local authorities and schools requiring intensive governance and coordination.

Administrative challenges related to data sharing are not an acceptable reason for failing to give families an essential nutritional safety net. Receiving statutory benefits should be easy and straightforward for people who are eligible.

To remove this burden from local authorities and ensure all children who are entitled to a Free School Meal are receiving it, we urge you to introduce an auto-enrolment system at the national level that would register eligible families to receive Free School Meals using benefits data, unless families decide to opt out. This requires data-sharing between your two departments as the Department for Work & Pensions holds data that identifies children who are eligible for these schemes and the Department of Education administers the scheme. As a statutory scheme, funding for all eligible children should already be available.

As a matter of urgency, we call on the Government to use the upcoming Children's Wellbeing Bill to introduce auto-enrolment for Free School Meals and ensure all those eligible are in receipt of their entitlement.

Yours sincerely,

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Cllr Lisa Brown, Deputy Leader, Cumberland Council

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Councillor Alison Evans, Cabinet Member for Cost of Living, Equalities and Public Health, South Gloucestershire Council

Mark Pullin, Service Director for Community Development & Partnerships, South Gloucestershire Council

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