

Government consultation on eligibility for free school meals and the early years pupil premium under Universal Credit



About School Food Matters

Since 2007, School Food Matters has been campaigning for fresh sustainable food in schools and promoting food education through cooking, growing and visits to farms. In 2012 we were invited to join the School Food Plan's Expert Panel, tasked by the Department for Education to create an action plan to support head teachers to improve school food and in 2013 joined the Department's External Reference Group on Universal Infant Free School Meals. School Food Matters CEO, Stephanie Wood, is co-Chair of School Food Plan Alliance, established in 2016 to champion that vision of the School Food Plan and its 17 actions.

1. Do you agree with our proposed net earnings threshold to determine eligibility for free school meals and the early years pupil premium under Universal Credit?

No

We believe that if a family is in need of Universal Credit, they should be eligible for free school meals. Research by The Children's Society¹ estimates that a million children in poverty will miss out on a free school meal under this proposal. Therefore we do not agree with the introduction of a net earnings threshold of £7,400 to determine eligibility for free school meals under Universal Credit.

Tackling Poverty

The Child Poverty Action Group² reports that almost a third of children in the UK are living in poverty, and many have a poor diet as a result. Government can help to alleviate this crisis by increasing eligibility and uptake of free school meals, ensuring that all children from low-income households receive a nutritious meal at lunchtime.

Free school meals are worth about £400 per year per child. Households just above the threshold of £7,400 net earnings would need to earn £1,124 a year more per child, the equivalent of working 2.4 hours more each week at national living wage, to make up for the loss in free school meals. For a family with three children, that means increasing gross earnings by £3,582 a year.

Families faced with the proposed earnings threshold will have to make a choice; earn less and stay within the threshold or switch to cheaper packed lunches. Research from Leeds University³ has shown that only 1% of packed lunches meet the same nutritional standards of a school meal and the Department for Education highlighted this fact during its implementation of Universal Infant Free School Meals. Unhealthy packed lunches will add to the poor diets of many low-income families.

¹ <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/news-and-blogs/press-releases/universal-credit-one-million-children-in-poverty-to-miss-out-on-free>

² <http://www.cpag.org.uk/>

³ 28 Evans C, Greenwood D, Thomas J, Cade J, "A cross-sectional survey of children's packed lunches in the UK: food and nutrient based results", *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, 2010

Low-income families falling out of free school meal entitlement will be faced with the additional financial burden of losing some 'passport' benefits offered by schools or local authorities such as free uniform, free school trips, free breakfasts and free music lessons.

Case study – lessons learned from Universal Infant Free School Meals

This headteacher from a primary school talked about the value of extending free school meals to all infants and the challenges of supporting those families 'just about managing' ie falling outside the threshold.

We welcomed the policy as it provided an opportunity to support those families who just miss out on the Free School Meal (FSM) entitlement and struggle to find the money to pay for a school meal. Before UIFSM, many of these families were providing unhealthy packed lunches, which the school had to 'police'. With UIFSM the entire cohort in KS1 got behind the offer and we have near 100% take-up.

A key issue was removing the stigma around FSM. Despite being in an affluent London borough, 27% of the children at our school are currently entitled to FSM but nearer 40% have been entitled to FSM with in the past 6 years. This is a clear indicator that many of the families are only just about managing. At KS2 there is a significant drop off in take-up - down to 50% - and that's not due to the quality of the food, rather the families' ability to pay. We have chosen to subsidize some KS2 families outside the FSM threshold to ensure that the children are well-nourished and ready to learn. Without UIFSM there will be many more families to help on an every shrinking budget.

Improving diets and attainment

The UK has one of the worst childhood obesity rates globally with one third of children leaving primary school either overweight or obese⁴. The NHS estimates that £16million is spent dealing with diet related disease, including diabetes and dental care⁵. Schools are an obvious place to start tackling this crisis and healthy nutritious school meals help to normalise healthy eating during these formative years.

Much work has been put into improving the food served in schools over the last decade, including the Department for Education's School Food Plan in 2013. Getting school food right is a priority as for many, and particularly those on a low income, school lunch constitutes the only opportunity in the day for a nutritious meal. This is vital when three quarters of teachers report children arriving at school too hungry to learn⁶.

The impact of eating well in the day goes further than just health, with the evaluation of free school meal pilots showing that better diet improves attainment⁷. The pilots saw that children in receipt of free school meals were found to be on average two months ahead of their peers elsewhere. Around 2% more children reached target levels in Maths and English at Key Stage 1; while at Key Stage 2 the impact on achievement was between 3% and 5%. Academic improvements were most marked among children from less affluent families.

If low-income families have to switch to packed lunches, their children will be put at a disadvantage to their peers with the healthier diet offered by school meals, risking widening the attainment gap.

⁴ National Child Measurement Programme 2016 -2017: <https://digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB30113>

⁵ Telegraph: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/07/more-spent-on-treating-obesity-related-conditions-than-on-the-po/>

⁶ <https://www.nasuwat.org.uk/article-listing/child-hunger-is-a-national-scandal.html>

⁷ Department for Education: Jan 2013

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/184047/DFE-RR227.pdf

Increasing school meal take-up

The School Food Plan demonstrated that increasing take-up of school meals was key to the success of the service, a service that would bring about improvements in health, attainment and well-being for school children. To this end, the Department for Education invested in a campaign to increase take-up of school meals in junior and secondary schools; those settings where children don't benefit from Universal Infant Free School Meals.

By making FSM available to **all** families receiving Universal Credit we ensure that 2.8 million children from low-income households receive a nutritious meal at lunchtime and we give the Department for Education the opportunity to further boost school meal numbers, bring further investment into the service to improve the quality of school meals, and help to normalize healthy eating for many more children.

2. Do you agree with our intention to protect those pupils who would otherwise lose their entitlement to free school meals, and those children who would otherwise lose their entitlement to the early years pupil premium, under the new eligibility criteria?

Yes the measures seem fair but rather complicated and will be difficult for local authorities to communicate, schools to administer and parents to understand. We believe that all families in receipt of Universal Credit should receive free school meals.

Should the proposal go ahead, communication to local authorities, schools and parents will be key and we have yet to understand how the challenges of transition will be managed in a school setting to ensure that no child misses out on their school meals whilst waiting for confirmation of entitlement. Likewise the logistics of managing children falling in and out of entitlement are worrying and need addressing.

Furthermore, points 5.7 and 5.8 refer to the importance of encouraging take-up of free school meals. Point 5.7 describes take up of FSM as being high but recent data shows that eligibility and take-up is declining, now at its lowest level since 2011⁸. If this means fewer families are in need of benefit support, perhaps there is more money in the system to support the families that do? If it means that fewer families are claiming, despite being eligible, we have a communication issue that needs urgently addressing so that every child receives the hot nutritious school meal to which they are entitled.

Government funding post the School Food Plan to increase take-up of school meals was removed which was regrettable as we still believe that a push from government is needed to ensure that all children entitled to a free school meal claim it (see notes on increasing take-up of school meals).

⁸ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/650547/SFR28_2017_Main_Text.pdf

3. Do you feel that the proposals in this consultation may adversely affect any children who share one or more of the relevant protected characteristics outlined in the Equality Act 2010?

n/a

4. Do you have any views on the proposed management of the changes to the disadvantage measures or on the metrics we publish for the measurement of disadvantaged pupils' performance?

n/a