

“We know that at least 10% of families who are entitled to free school meals do not apply to receive them” – Prof Maria Bryant Hull, York Medical School at the University of York

Issue: Free school meals bring financial benefits to families and to schools. Nationally, the difference between children eligible for FSMs and those that actually claim FSMs is estimated to be worth £241m. Around 470,000 claims are not made ([Missing Out report 2024](#) – Policy In Practice). Those missing out are from the poorest families and the number is growing each year.

Solution: Up to 30 local authorities (LAs) are now considering auto-enrolment for FSMs and [FixOurFood](#) is now working with 66 LAs investigating setting up auto-enrolment. If all of them set this up it could lead to an additional £62m for schools and £18m savings to the poorest families. The ‘opt-out’ rather than ‘opt-in’ approach uses data already held within the authorities to identify families that are eligible and enrolls them automatically, unless they choose to ‘opt out’. This generates extra funding for families and schools. At present the only Local Authority committed to introducing auto-enrolment in the South West is Plymouth.

General Background:

Free School Meals (FSMs): FSMs are available to pupils in receipt of, or whose parents are in receipt of, a range of benefits, see [Free School Meals Guidance](#). To receive free school meals, a claim must be made by the pupil, their parent or another responsible adult, before the pupil becomes entitled. Schools are then able to use the Eligibility Checking System (ECS) from the Department for Education to check each claim. In Jan 2024, nationally 24.6% of pupils were eligible for free school meals. This represents 2.1 million pupils. ([Schools Pupils and their Characteristics](#))

Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM): Since September 2014, state funded schools in England have been required by law to provide free lunches to pupils in reception, year 1 and year 2, who are not otherwise entitled to benefits-related free school meals. This change has resulted in parents of children eligible for FSMs not claiming as their children in the early years of primary school now receive free school meals anyway.

Pupil premium: Pupil Premium funding is allocated to schools based on the number of pupils who are recorded as eligible for FSMs, or have been recorded as eligible in the past 6 years (referred to as Ever 6 FSM). Rates currently are £1455 per eligible child in primary and £1035 per eligible student in secondary schools, paid directly to schools. Pupil premium is not a personal budget for individual pupils it can be used to support other pupils with identified needs, such as those who have or have had a social worker, or who act as a carer.

Local Background:

The number of Children eligible for FSMs continues to rise locally. [Spring 2024](#) 20,098 pupils in Devon LA schools and academies were eligible for FSMs, 19.9% of total pupils. If the percentage of FSM entitled pupils missing out is 10%, then auto-enrolment could provide around £2m extra funding for Devon schools.

Benefits of auto-enrolment for FSMs:

- More deprived pupils will benefit from a nutritious meal and will be better able to concentrate in class
- Barriers will be removed that families often face when applying e.g. around language, literacy, cultural or technical issues. Evidence from one local authority 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 ([FixOurFood](#)).
- Signing up for FSMs can save parents on average £450 per child per year
- Families will benefit from [HAF schemes](#) and uniform grants
- Research study launched by the [Children's Food Campaign](#) revealed that 81% of parents support automatic registration for free school meals for all entitled pupils, instead of the current application system
- Additional Pupil Premium Funding will be available to schools at a time when school budgets are under severe pressure
- Pressure will lift from school staff to put forward families to check eligibility
- Support and toolkits from successful auto-enrolment LAs are now available.

Barriers to auto-enrolment for FSMs:

- Will create an administrative burden on LAs
- Non-unitary authorities will have to access data held by district councils
- Buy-in and support from different teams will be required after overcoming resistance to a new approach
- Concern around legal challenges for accessing data and consents.

Conclusion:

The idea of auto enrolment has been around for a while, but the subject is now receiving more attention see [local news article](#) and national news articles, [Guardian December 2024](#), the [BBC, October 2024](#). The [Free School Meals \(Automatic Registration of Eligible Children\) Bill](#) is awaiting its second reading in parliament (March 2025) and asks the government to auto-enrol on behalf of all authorities. This has been suggested at governmental level before, but met with reluctance around the complex data systems, financial and legal implications of combining data from DfE and DWP. It is therefore likely that LAs will need to lead on the change so the poorest families and schools do not continue to lose out. One in eight children in Devon Local Authority live in poverty ([Tackling Poverty Strategic Plan - DCC](#)) and research shows that the South West has the worst educational outcomes for disadvantaged young people in the country ([Social Mobility in the South West - Professor Lee Elliot Major](#)), FSM auto-enrolment could make a real difference, so we would actively support the Devon Local Authority to urgently adopt FSM auto-enrolment.