



# Free school meals in the North West

February 2024

---

## Summary

This report focuses on free school meals (FSM) in the North West of England, including new statistics on the number of children in poverty across the region missing out. It also looks at the role of schools and local authorities in FSM provision. Finally the report considers the socio-economic benefits, including the impact on children's socio-economic rights, that support a nationwide universal roll out of FSM.

- **100,000 children in poverty in the North West of England do not qualify for free school meals (FSM).**
- These children are spread out across the region, and new analysis shows that **every local authority (LA) has thousands of children in poverty who miss out.**
- CPAG encourages LAs to do all they can to increase the number of children in low-income families benefiting from FSM, but recognises the different and difficult environments that they operate in. We encourage local and regional authorities to extend the provision of FSM where funding can be made available.
- There are **also low-cost and no-cost practices LAs can adopt to improve take-up under the existing eligibility criteria.** LAs and local leaders can also support calls for a nationwide expansion to ensure FSM provision reaches all children.
- As well as LAs, **schools can work to identify and address any existing policies or practices that either prevent pupils taking up their FSM entitlement or further disadvantage them.**
- However, the responsibility for tackling this issue does not rest with LAs and schools. **The UK government must provide universal FSM for all children and young people in full-time education up to the age of 18 in England.**<sup>1</sup> Aside from the obvious benefits of ensuring no children goes hungry at school, and improving family finances, introducing universal FSM would help to realise **children's socio-economic rights**, as well as a **variety of socio-economic benefits.**

---

<sup>1</sup> Funding would then be provided through the Barnett formula to the devolved administrations to provide universal FSM in their jurisdictions.

## 1. Introduction

There is only one part of the school day that is means-tested – dinner time. CPAG believes that all school children should be offered a balanced and filling school meal each day without cost. The current provision of FSM is far too restrictive and means that 900,000 children living in poverty in England<sup>2</sup> miss out on FSM.<sup>3</sup> Many children are going hungry at school, as low-income families struggle to afford a balanced and filling midday meal for their children each day. As well as helping to tackle hunger in the classroom and boost household finances, providing universal FSM can be an important step towards supporting children's socio-economic rights and deliver a variety of benefits to children, families and their communities.

Child poverty rates have been rising across the UK, but certain parts of the country fare particularly badly. **More than one in three children in the North West are currently living in poverty, and this number has been rising alarmingly in recent years.**<sup>4</sup> We have worked with local partners – Greater Manchester Poverty Action (GMPA) – to get a greater insight into what is happening at a local level around FSM provision.

The case study below illustrates the difference universal FSM would make to one struggling family in Manchester. There are tens of thousands of families in the North West and hundreds of thousands across England in a similar position.

### Case study 1: lived experience

A couple from Manchester who have one daughter struggle with the cost of living and must manage budgets very carefully, despite both parents working full time. After covering monthly bills and essential costs, the family is left with no disposable income for any “little luxuries”. The mother expresses frustration that despite working full time and being responsible with money, there is no room in the family budget for treats.

As both parents are in work their earnings are higher than the means-tested FSM eligibility threshold, which is set at £7,400 a year for those in receipt of universal credit. If they received FSM, they would have around an extra £60 each month in their family budget. When asked what difference this additional money would make to the family, the mother responded “it’s ridiculous how much difference that would make”, and said that receiving FSM would be an “amazing help”. The mother explained that there is absolutely no room in monthly budgets, and if an extra £10 was to be spent on grocery shopping, this would have to be taken from another bill or financial commitment.

*Source: Greater Manchester Poverty Action (GMPA)*

This briefing consists of two parts. The first part examines the provision and take-up of FSM in the North West of England, combining quantitative analysis with recommendations for LAs and schools. The second part explores the socio-economic benefits of FSMs, including furthering the realisation of children’s socio-economic rights, that show why the UK government should roll out universal FSM.

<sup>2</sup> Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have separate provisions, which cover more children in poverty than England. For more details see CPAG, [Behind the numbers: free school meals](#), 2022

<sup>3</sup> CPAG, [Free School Meals, third of kids in poverty miss out](#), 2023

<sup>4</sup> End Child Poverty, [Local child poverty indicators 2021/22 – estimates of rates, after housing costs](#), 2023

## 2. FSM in the North West

Previous analysis from CPAG found that 100,000 school-age children living in poverty in the North West miss out on any form of FSM (more than one in four children).<sup>5</sup> This new piece of analysis provides an estimate of the number who miss out in each LA, as well as recommendations for LAs and schools about how to increase the number of children with access to FSM.

### Quantitative analysis

Using administrative education data and household survey income data, CPAG previously found that more than one in four school-aged children living in poverty in the North West cannot access a free school meal each day.<sup>6</sup> Our new analysis shows the spread of these 100,000 children across the different LAs in the region. Poverty data at the local level is limited, but it is possible to establish where these children are by combining administrative education data with local estimates of the poverty rate in that area.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to note here that there are two forms of national FSM provision in England. Means-tested FSM, which are available to families who meet certain stringent eligibility criteria,<sup>8</sup> and universal FSM, which are available to all children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2.<sup>9</sup>

Table 1 shows the number of children claiming *means-tested* FSM by LA in the North West. We can see that across the region just over 0.3 million children out of 1.15 million are registered for means-tested FSM. However, these are not spread evenly across areas with some LAs, such as Blackpool at 41 per cent, having a much higher rate of children in receipt of FSM than other areas. This variation is due to differences in household income between local authority areas, and differences in the number of families registering for their entitlement. However, it is difficult, with the data we have, to disentangle the two. Unsurprisingly, there is a clear relationship between the levels of children in receipt of FSM and the local poverty rate. Areas with a high poverty rate also have a high number of children in receipt of FSM and vice-versa.

---

<sup>5</sup> CPAG, [Free School Meals, third of kids in poverty miss out](#), 2023

<sup>6</sup> Administrative education data comes from Department for Education, *Schools, pupils and their characteristics 2022/23*, 2023 and Department for Work and Pensions, *Households Below Average Income, 2019/20-2021/22*, 2023. For more details of this calculation see the appendix.

<sup>7</sup> See Note 6 for administrative education data source. Local child poverty data comes from End Child Poverty, *Local child poverty indicators 2021/22 – estimates of rates, after housing costs*, 2023

<sup>8</sup> See appendix for more details.

<sup>9</sup> Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have different provision – for more details see CPAG, [Behind the numbers: free school meals](#), 2022.

Table 1: Children claiming means-tested FSM by local authority

Local authority	Total pupils	Claiming pupils	Claimant rate
Blackburn with Darwen	28,125	7,012	25%
Blackpool	19,955	8,269	41%
Bolton	53,667	13,911	26%
Bury	29,344	6,750	23%
Cheshire East	57,167	8,928	16%
Cheshire West and Chester	51,907	10,116	19%
Cumbria	70,791	12,699	18%
Halton	19,052	7,255	38%
Knowsley	21,452	8,651	40%
Lancashire	179,116	41,115	23%
Liverpool	77,791	25,796	33%
Manchester	93,201	39,858	43%
Oldham	45,986	14,382	31%
Rochdale	38,048	11,662	31%
Salford	38,532	13,206	34%
Sefton	40,672	10,138	25%
St. Helens	27,279	7,242	27%
Stockport	43,893	8,773	20%
Tameside	37,586	11,472	31%
Trafford	43,709	6,739	15%
Warrington	33,286	7,169	22%
Wigan	48,253	13,015	27%
Wirral	51,193	14,537	28%
<b>North West</b>	<b>1,150,005</b>	<b>308,695</b>	<b>27%</b>

Source: See Note 6

From these figures, and using the household income survey, it is possible to estimate that **100,000 children in the North West who are currently living in poverty are not eligible for any form of FSM.**<sup>10</sup> There are an additional 30,000 children living in poverty who do not qualify for means-tested FSM but can get universal infant FSM.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> For details of the methodology see the appendix.

<sup>11</sup> It is in the family's and school's interest to register for means-tested FSM, even if they already receive universal infant FSM. Being registered for means-tested FSM means the family is eligible for other financial support such as school uniform grants. Schools also receive additional funding through the pupil premium (see note 13) for every child registered for means-tested FSM.

Using administrative education data and local poverty estimates, Table 2 shows the breakdown, by LA, of those not eligible for either scheme (100,000), alongside the total number not eligible for means-tested FSM (130,000).

Table 2: Number of children in poverty who do not qualify for FSM by local authority

Local authority	Children in poverty who do not qualify for any form of FSM	Children in poverty who do not qualify for means-tested FSM
Blackburn with Darwen	3,000	4,000
Blackpool	2,000	2,500
Bolton	5,500	7,500
Bury	3,000	3,500
Cheshire East	3,500	4,500
Cheshire West and Chester	3,500	4,500
Cumbria	4,500	6,000
Halton	1,500	2,000
Knowsley	2,000	3,000
Lancashire	15,000	20,000
Liverpool	6,500	9,000
Manchester	10,500	14,000
Oldham	5,000	6,500
Rochdale	4,000	5,500
Salford	4,000	5,500
Sefton	3,000	4,000
St. Helens	2,000	3,000
Stockport	3,000	4,000
Tameside	3,500	4,500
Trafford	3,500	3,000
Warrington	2,000	2,500
Wigan	4,000	5,000
Wirral	3,500	5,000
<b>North West</b>	<b>100,000</b>	<b>130,000</b>

Source: See Note 6

## Local authority recommendations

While CPAG encourages LAs to do all they can to expand FSM eligibility to more children, we know that many local authorities are struggling after a decade of stringent budget cuts and increased demand for services. First and foremost, it is the role of central government to ensure there is long-term, expansive provision of FSM to all children.

However, there are valuable steps LAs can take to ensure they are maximising the number of families benefiting from FSM in their area and more widely and where local and regional authorities are in a position to step in with additional funding schemes we strongly support this leadership. We outline these steps below.

### 1. Improve registration and take-up of FSM under current eligibility criteria

There are various no-cost and low-cost measures LAs can take to improve take-up of FSM under current eligibility criteria. These include:

- Make information on eligibility for FSM (as well as other support) easy for families to find.
- If a family is accessing other financial support through the council, ensure they also apply for FSM or support them to do so.
- Work with schools in the area to share effective practices and resources that are supporting families to apply.
- Actively find and enrol, by using LA records and existing data, families who might be eligible but are not taking up FSM, with appropriate data protection policies in place. There are many examples of LAs and councils across England taking this approach, with positive outcomes for families. LAs and councils can access resources for more information on setting this up.<sup>12</sup>

#### Case study 2: Oldham Council

Oldham operates an “opt-out” process for FSM for those who have applied for certain benefits. This means that when a resident claims council tax reduction, if they have any eligible children within their household, and qualify for FSM, the council will award them.

This process does not extend FSM provision per se, but it does improve take-up among those who are already eligible. Because these children are already eligible under national schemes, Oldham Council gets additional funding to cover the children who are identified using this process.

*Source: Greater Manchester Poverty Action (GMPA)*

<sup>12</sup> Fix our Food, [Free School Meals Auto-enrolment Toolkit and Resources](#)

## 2. Extend FSM provision to more children, if funding is available

There are many different ways of extending FSM to more pupils, from targeting children in families in receipt of certain benefits to universal provision. While it should be the role of central government to expand provision across the country, in the absence of this many areas are piloting different approaches. These schemes are helping to support struggling families and contribute valuable evidence to the case for nationwide expansion.

### Case study 3: Stockport Council

In January 2023 Stockport passed the Stockport School Meal Support Scheme, which has, so far, led to nearly 1,000 children whose families are in receipt of council tax support and/or housing benefit receiving FSM.

The reason given for the scheme was “the provision of free school meals offers many benefits to children” and “prior to the current cost of living crisis, 800,000 school age children nationally who live in poverty are unable to receive FSM because their families’ income surpass the rigid income threshold for receiving FSM”.

The council will periodically search again throughout the school year to ensure that eligible children are continually identified and enrolled onto the scheme.

The scheme has been received as overwhelmingly positive across the borough and received cross party support within the council. However, at the time of writing, a decision has not yet been taken on whether the scheme will be extended beyond the 2023-24 academic year.

*Source: Greater Manchester Poverty Action (GMPA)*

## 3. Support calls for a nationwide expansion to ensure FSM reach all children and young people

LAs, councils and local leaders can also use their influencing power and local evidence base to advocate for a nationwide expansion of FSM, calling on all parties and politicians to ensure FSM provision reaches children and young people across the country.

Where additional support for FSMs is provided on a local or regional basis, gathering evidence about the impact this has for children and their families will be invaluable to help to make the case at a national level.

### School recommendations

Schools also have an important role to play in promoting take-up of FSM, and this has benefits in the classroom as they receive more central government funding through the pupil premium.<sup>13</sup> We know many schools go to great lengths to identify and support children from low-incomes families, against a backdrop of cuts to school funding and increasing levels of poverty and hardship. Nonetheless, we encourage all schools to continue to examine existing and new policies or practices, ensuring that they do not prevent pupils taking up their FSM entitlement or further disadvantage them. Potential measures include:

- Regularly and consistently promoting information about FSM and the application process to all families, and ensuring families know who in school to contact to discuss FSM.

<sup>13</sup> The pupil premium grant is funding to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in state-funded schools in England.

- Identifying families who are struggling with dinner money payments and debt, and encouraging these families to re-check their eligibility. Schools can also use this as an opportunity to signpost families to other support.
- Providing direct support to families who may face practical barriers to filling in paper or online forms, such as translation services and access to devices/internet in school to apply.
- Encouraging families to apply for means-tested FSM even if they currently receive universal infant FSM. This will increase school funding through the pupil premium – enabling greater support for children from low-income families across the school day.
- Promoting the wider benefits of FSM to ensure that parents know it is about more than the meal. Registration often means children can access support with wider school costs, get free school milk and can access holiday activity fund provision.
- Overcoming other financial barriers to learning and poverty related stigma that exist in schools.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. The case for universal FSM

LAs and schools can only have so much impact under the current national provision of FSM. CPAG calls on the **UK government to provide universal FSM for all children in full-time education up to the age of 18 in England**. Aside from the obvious benefits of **ensuring no child goes hungry at school, and improving family finances, introducing universal FSM would result in a variety of socio-economic benefits, and help realise children's socio-economic rights**.

CPAG estimates that rolling out universal FSM in England would cost an additional £2 billion a year, with the vast benefits of universal FSM more than justifying this financial investment in children.

#### Socio-economic benefits

A study from Sweden found that universal FSM generated substantial short-term and long-term benefits. In the short term the programme **improved educational attainment**. In the long term, pupils exposed to the programme during their entire time at primary school had **3 per cent higher lifetime income**. The effect was greater for pupils who were exposed at earlier ages and for pupils from poor households (6 per cent), suggesting that the programme reduced socio-economic inequalities in adulthood. However, it was not just students from poor families who benefited – students from richer households also had a two per cent higher lifetime income.<sup>15</sup>

There is some international evidence that shows that **universal FSM programmes improve attendance**.<sup>16</sup> Prior research suggests the greatest benefits may be in certain populations (ie, children who are food insecure and/or from low-income households), which should be accounted for in future evaluations.

An evaluation of universal infant FSM in England also found **substantial health benefits**.<sup>17</sup> Exposure to high quality universal FSM increased healthy weight prevalence and reduced obesity prevalence and BMI by the end of the first year of school. The effect seems driven by substitution of home-produced meals with school meals among

<sup>14</sup> For more details see NEU, CPAG and Children North East, *Turning the page on poverty*, 2021

<sup>15</sup> Lund University, *Free and nutritious school lunches help create richer and healthier adults*, 2021

<sup>16</sup> J F W Cohen and G M McLoughlin, *An Updated Systematic Review of the Literature Examining Universal Free School Meals in the United Kingdom and Internationally*, London City Hall, June 2023

<sup>17</sup> A Holford and B Rabe, 'Going universal. The impact of free school lunches on child body weight outcomes', *Journal of Public Economics Plus*, Volume 3, 2022



children not eligible under means-testing. This suggests universal provision can improve the diets of all pupils, including those from better-off families.

There are also more immediate social and health benefits of universal FSM. First, **universal FSM reduce the stigma around household finances**. Evidence shows that pupils are aware of their own FSM eligibility, but are also aware when their families are struggling and accruing dinner money debt.<sup>18</sup> There is also evidence to show that **introducing universal FSM increases take-up among students who were already eligible for means-tested FSM**, which demonstrates the power of stigma in school environments and the value of universal provision in increasing take-up.<sup>19</sup> Introducing universal FSM also reduces stress and anxiety around payments at school for parents and children. Children also benefit from the social experience of sitting down together in a shared dining hall and eating the same food.<sup>20</sup>

### Realisation of children's socio-economic rights

Two key international human rights treaties that relate to the provision of FSM are the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (“**UNCRC**”) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights (“**ICESCR**”). Both of these human rights treaties have been ratified by the UK but neither have been incorporated into domestic law.

#### International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (IESCR)

- Under the ICESCR, Article 11 recognises the right to an adequate standard of living (which includes adequate food) and Article 13 requires an adequate standard of education. Article 11(2) specifically guarantees the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger and obliges states to take steps to improve methods of food distribution and dissemination of knowledge on principles of nutrition.
- General Comment 12<sup>21</sup> on the right to adequate food, which was issued by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, acknowledges that the human right to adequate food is of crucial importance for the enjoyment of all rights, and defines the steps that must be taken by states to ensure that the right to food is fulfilled at a national level. It also identifies positive obligations on states to fulfil the right to adequate food when individuals are unable to do so themselves.

#### UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

- Under the UNCRC, Article 27 provides that children have the right to food, clothing and a safe space to live and that the government should help families and children who cannot afford this.<sup>22</sup> Article 28 provides that every child has a right to an education.
- In the strongest declaration of the link between education and the need for adequate nutrition seen at this level, General Comment 15 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the highest attainable standard of health states that *"School feeding is desirable to ensure all pupils have access to a full meal every day, which can also enhance children's attention for learning and increase school enrolment."* The

<sup>18</sup> CPAG and the NEU, [The universalism multiplier](#), 2023

<sup>19</sup> V R Carlisle and others, [‘A mixed methods, quasi-experimental evaluation exploring the impact of a secondary school universal free school meals intervention pilot’](#), *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2023

<sup>20</sup> Education Policy Institute, [Evaluation of Universal Infant Free School Meals](#), 2018

<sup>21</sup> General Comments interpret and provide guidance as to how the treaty provisions should practically be implemented by states.

<sup>22</sup> Unicef, [Convention on the Rights of the Child - the children's version](#)

Committee has also specifically recommended that the UK government should “*expand the free school meals programme to all children in disadvantaged situations.*”

- The inherent dignity of every child is a core value of the UNCRC, and children’s right to education must be realised in a way that respects children’s dignity. General Comment 1 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child makes clear that Article 29 of the UNCRC – which governs the aims of education – requires the educational environment to promote the development of children’s self-esteem and self-confidence, including in relation to their social interactions with others.

The introduction of universal FSM to all children in the UK would be a significant step towards ensuring the UK is meeting our international human rights obligations under these different conventions.

## 4. Conclusion

Child poverty rates in the UK have been rising over the past decade and are due to rise even further in coming years. Certain parts of the country fare particularly badly, including the North West of England. The government needs a plan to tackle child poverty, and providing all children with a midday meal at school is one of the first, immediate steps the government can take to help the growing numbers of children living in poverty.

Aside from the obvious benefits of ensuring no child goes hungry at school, and improving family finances, introducing universal FSM would help to realise children's socio-economic, as well as a variety of socio-economic benefits, that far outweigh the costs involved.

## About this briefing

CPAG would like to thank Hogan Lovells and Law For Change for generously funding this research. Hogan Lovells authored the legal basis section, while Greater Manchester Poverty Action (GMPA) and Rachel Stalker (Liverpool John Moores University) provided case studies specific to the North West of England.

## About CPAG

Child Poverty Action Group works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. Our vision is of a society free of child poverty, where all children can enjoy a childhood free of financial hardship and have a fair chance in life to reach their full potential. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and end poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need.

## Appendix

### Means-tested eligibility criteria

Families receiving universal credit are currently eligible for FSM if their family income is below £7,400 a year (before benefits are taken into account). Families receiving child tax credit are only eligible for FSM if they are not claiming working tax credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190.

In 2013 when the universal credit roll-out began, the government introduced a temporary measure making all families in receipt of universal credit eligible for FSM. The temporary measure was designed to protect families from losing out on entitlements during the initial stages of the roll-out. New eligibility criteria was introduced in 2018, and families applying for FSM since 1 April 2018 must have an income less than £7,400 to be eligible.

### Methodology

The poverty measure used is relative after housing costs. The estimated number of children in poverty who missed out on FSM was calculated using Households Below Average Income 2021/22. From that survey data, entitlement can be calculated based on the earnings of the household and the various eligibility criteria for different means-tested benefits, accounting for the migration of households on to universal credit.

There will be some households who currently earn above the eligibility criteria but because of transitional protection on universal credit, they are still eligible for FSM. The number of these households was calculated using data on the share of FSM-eligible pupils in Wales who are covered by transitional protection (similar data does not exist publicly in England). Understanding Society data was then used to estimate the number of these households who are above and below the poverty line.

The regional breakdown was calculated by averaging the share of children who missed out on FSM in 2021/22 and 2019/20, and applying this share to the 2021/22 total figure.