



THE COST OF THE SCHOOL DAY

EXPANDING ELIGIBILITY FOR FREE SCHOOL MEALS IN ENGLAND

Briefing for MPs

Updated December 2020

This briefing aims to give you more information about free school meals, including the importance of universal free school meal provision for all school-aged children in England, and the urgent need to significantly expand eligibility, particularly in light of the coronavirus pandemic.

If you have any questions, or would like to meet with us to discuss free school meals or school costs, please contact Kate Anstey, UK Cost of the School Day Lead, on kanstey@cpag.org.uk.

This briefing covers:

1. New Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) calculations
2. Universal free school meals
3. Background information on free school meals eligibility
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1. New Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) calculations

New CPAG calculations show that prior to the pandemic, at least two in five school-age children in England (1.2 million) who lived below the UK's poverty line were not eligible for free school meals. CPAG estimates that expanding eligibility for free school meals to include all families receiving universal credit (or equivalent benefits) would make 1.8 million children newly eligible, the majority of which are living in poverty. This would cost the UK government an additional £750 million per year to ensure children from low income households can have a balanced meal each day and benefit from the learning and health outcomes, as well as supporting struggling families. In addition, CPAG estimates that there are 86,000 children in England (who are not covered by universal infant free school meals) in families with no recourse to public funds. Many of these children will be living well below the poverty line but are not usually eligible for means-tested free school meals. A permanent expansion of eligibility to families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) would cost at most £40million a year in England, although it's likely to be much lower than this as not all families with NRPF will be eligible.

2. Universal free school meals

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) has long been an advocate of making free school meals a universal part of the school experience. As well as preventing and reducing child poverty, the provision of school meals to all pupils has a number of other well-documented benefits:

1. **It helps to tackle inequalities.** Many families living in poverty are not currently entitled to free school meals for their children, but are unable to afford to pay for meals themselves. Making the approach universal avoids children missing out because of the harshness of the means-tested system.
2. **It supports family budgets and home life.** Families with more than one child particularly benefit from this increase in disposable income that can be spent on other living costs, ultimately reducing pressure on household finances. A universal approach also removes the cliff edge associated with increasing earnings and therefore reduces the poverty trap.¹
3. **It boosts learning and attainment.** School meals impact positively on children's learning experiences. An evaluation of a universal free school meals pilot for primary school children showed significant increases in attainment (around two months' more progress), and this increase was found to be greater among less affluent pupils.²
4. **It boosts uptake and reduces poverty-related stigma.** Uptake of free school meals by those eligible for means-tested free school meals has been shown to increase when the offer is universal. The stigma associated with free school meals, which can reduce take-up, is removed by viewing school meals as a basic entitlement for all children.³
5. **It helps to create bonds in the dinner hall through shared meal experiences.** Free school meals impact all areas of schooling including social relationships. There are clear benefits to the school community from pupils sitting down together and eating the same food, as well as observing and learning social skills through the shared dining experience.⁴
6. **It supports children's health by providing a balanced meal each day.** Having a balanced meal each day can have a positive impact on children's health and development. An adequate school meal also helps to increase concentration levels throughout the day and provides an opportunity for children to experience new food. A universal approach has the potential to decrease health inequalities among children.

CPAG estimates that providing a daily meal for every child in school would cost the government an additional £1.6bn per year on top of the current status-quo of means-tested free school meals and universal infant free school meals.

Case study – universal free school meals in Islington, London

In 2011, Islington Council implemented universal free school meals (UFSM) for all primary-aged pupils in order to support children's wellbeing and learning, and to ease pressures on families. In 2019, a review of the policy found that there was increased take-up among primary-aged children and this included children who were previously entitled to free school meals but weren't having them. This indicates that the universal offer helped to remove

¹ [The free school meals poverty trap](#), Child Poverty Action Group and The Children's Society, 2018

² [Free school meals pilot: impact report](#), Department for Education, 2012

³ [The effectiveness of Islington's Free School Meals policy](#), Islington Council, 2019

⁴ [Evaluation of Universal Infant Free School Meals](#), Education Policy Institute, 2018

stigma associated with the means-tested free school meals. The policy also helped to ensure that children with no recourse to public funds, many of whom live in extreme poverty, could benefit from a school meal each day.⁵

3. Background information on free school meals eligibility

Many children living in poverty are not eligible for free school meals because their parents are in work or their families have no recourse to public funds. Taking action to expand eligibility for free school meals would help struggling families to cope, improve educational outcomes and tackle in-work poverty.

Eligibility criteria

Current eligibility criteria mean that parents often face a cliff edge when they reach a certain number of working hours (working 17 hours a week at national minimum wage means they are no longer eligible).

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 free school meals. The temporary measure was designed to protect families from losing out on entitlements during the initial stages of the roll-out. However, new eligibility criteria were introduced in 2018, with the result that households receiving universal credit would only be eligible for free school meals if their family income was below £7,400 (before benefits are taken into account). Although transitional protection remains in place while universal credit is being rolled-out (meaning that no children will lose free school meals during the rollout period), new analysis by CPAG shows that prior to the pandemic, 1.2 million schoolchildren in England who lived below the UK's poverty line were not entitled to free school meals.

One of the government's principal goals of universal credit is to ensure that additional earnings always leave families better off (in other words, that work always pays and is seen to pay). However, the introduction of the £7,400 threshold undermines this objective and has left some families trapped in poverty because they end up worse off if their overall earnings increase. If a family is earning just under the threshold, taking extra hours or getting a pay rise could make them worse off, through the loss of free school meals worth over £400 per child per year. By working part time (17 hours for a lone parent), families lose their entitlement. In addition, families are currently exempt from the benefit cap if they are earning at least £604 per month, but families lose their free school meals eligibility if they earn over £616 per month. This puts families in an impossible situation where any gains they make from being 'uncapped' may be lost through having to pay for school meals.

Prior to the pandemic, the number of pupils eligible for free school meals had recently risen because of the transitional protection that was applied in 2018 as part of the roll out of universal credit. In January 2020 it was reported that 17.3 per cent of pupils in England were known to be eligible for free school meals, an increase from 15.4 per cent in the previous year.⁶ However, the wider trend has been a fall in eligibility.

The main reason that so many children living in poverty are still not eligible for free school meals is because their parents are in work. Seven in every 10 poor children live in working families (prior to the pandemic). In other words, as in-work poverty has grown, entitlement to free school meals has fallen.

⁵ [The effectiveness of Islington's Free School Meals policy](#), Islington Council, 2019

⁶ [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2020](#), Department for Education, 2020

We do not currently know how many children will become newly eligible for free school meals as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. However, universal credit claims have increased significantly since March⁷ which suggests there will be a significant increase in families that qualify.

Why is now the time to campaign on free school meals?

The government's economic response to the pandemic has been innovative and widely welcomed, but specific financial support for families with children has been consistently overlooked. This, combined with the wider impact of a surge in unemployment and precarious household incomes, means that many families with children across the UK are struggling to stay afloat.

One of the few support measures that has targeted families with children has been the continuation of free school meal entitlements when schools were closed to most pupils. These have also been expanded to include children in families with no recourse to public funds (who are within the threshold) and were extended to all eligible families over the Easter, May half term and summer holidays during 2020. Although there were a number of challenges that prevented some families accessing their entitlement, CPAG's research has shown how valuable free school meals provision has been to many families since schools closed in March.⁸ Unfortunately however, as a result of the low threshold, lots of families who would have benefitted greatly did not qualify. CPAG urges immediate action that reaches families who are most in need of this support.

4. Urgent measures needed to expand eligibility

In the short term, there are a number of interim measures that should be taken to provide greater security for low-income families in England, especially at this time.

CPAG urgently calls for:

1. Expanding eligibility for free school meals to all families receiving universal credit (or equivalent benefits)

If the UK government implemented this measure in England, CPAG estimates that an additional 1.8 million children would benefit from free school meals, costing an additional £750 million a year.

- Expanding the threshold for those eligible for free school meals to all those in families receiving universal credit provides a protective measure for families who may be facing financial insecurity and fluctuations in income during this uncertain period.
- Many of the families on universal credit who currently do not qualify for free school meals fall well below the poverty line. This expansion would help to ensure that the majority of families experiencing poverty, and particularly in-work poverty, are provided with greater security.
- The expansion would mean the loss of eligibility would occur at much higher earnings helping to support more working families who are living in poverty.
- At a difficult time where children's lives have been disrupted in different ways by the pandemic, the provision of free school meals can help with all areas of schooling including social relationships, health and learning.

⁷ [Universal credit statistics](#), Department for Work and Pensions, 2020

⁸ [The Cost of Learning in Lockdown](#), Child Poverty Action Group, 2020

2. The temporary extension of free school meal entitlements to families with no recourse to public funds to be made permanent

Following the school closures brought about by the pandemic, the government extended free school meals to include families with no recourse to public funds. This was to support children in families facing difficulties due to the pandemic lockdown measures. A permanent expansion of eligibility to families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) would cost a maximum of £36 million a year in England, although it's likely to be much lower than this as not all families with NRPF will be eligible.

- Taking free school meals away from children who have already been acknowledged to be in need of support would show little compassion by the government.
- Many children with no recourse to public funds live in deep, long-term poverty and this has significant detrimental effects on their short and longer-term outcomes. Not providing these pupils with school meals will not only affect their health, but also their ability to participate in school after many months of home learning.

3. Universal infant free school meals to be retained

In 2014 it was announced that all children in the first three years of primary school would receive a free school meal regardless of income. This policy still remains in place and means that 1.7 million infant children⁹ are provided with a meal each day at school. At the time the policy was implemented the government stated the following benefits:

- it ensured every child living in poverty would be eligible for a free school meal;
- there were proven learning benefits for those in receipt of free school meals;
- it helped families with the cost of living; and
- it provided a range of health benefits by ensuring children could access a balanced meal each day.¹⁰

These compelling arguments, outlined by the government, apply universally to all school-aged children. The universal infant free school meal policy has also been proven to increase take-up of the entitlement by all children including those eligible for means-tested free school meals.

5. Summary of CPAG's calls to action on free school meals

The government should urgently take the following measures to provide greater security for families on low incomes, particularly in light of the additional financial pressures caused by the pandemic:

- **Expand eligibility for free school meals to all families receiving universal credit (or equivalent benefits)**
- **Permanently extend free school meal entitlements to families with no recourse to public funds**
- **Retain universal infant free school meals**

⁹ [School, pupils and their characteristics](#), Department for Education, 2020

¹⁰ [UIFSMs Infographic](#), Department for Education, 2013

In addition to these urgently-needed measures, we also call on the government to **implement universal provision of free school meals for all school-aged children in England**, in order to help struggling families, reduce stigma and inequalities, and improve children's health and wellbeing.

Free school meals won't end child poverty alone but they will go some way towards supporting family incomes while also making school a more equal experience for pupils.

Beyond free school meals, **CPAG is calling for an increase in child benefit of £10 per child per week** to ensure parents can cover the additional costs of raising their children. This includes the higher costs associated with having children at home during the school holidays. Holiday programmes are just one of the levers that support family finances (by allowing parents to work) as well as offering children a broad range of enrichment activities. However, in order to reduce child poverty the government must also increase household budgets so families can afford the things they need for their children throughout the year.

6. About the Cost of the School Day project

The Cost of the School Day project was started by CPAG in Scotland in 2014 with the aim of reducing the financial barriers that prevent pupils from fully participating in the school day. The Cost of the School Day approach involves working with whole-school communities to identify and reduce cost barriers faced by pupils from low-income backgrounds, including eating at school, uniform costs and school trips. Following the success of this project in Glasgow and Dundee, CPAG expanded the project to local authorities in England, Wales and new parts of Scotland in partnership with Children North East. Beyond school-level interventions, we also work with local authorities to bring about system and policy change. Find out more at: cpag.org.uk/cosd

7. About Child Poverty Action Group

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.