

THE COST OF MISSING LUNCHTIME: A BRIEFING ON FREE SCHOOL MEALS IN THE NORTH EAST OF ENGLAND

Briefing for MPs, councils and schools in the North East

May 2021

This briefing aims to give you information about free school meals in the North East of England, including new calculations carried out by Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), Children North East (CNE) and the North East Child Poverty Commission (NECPC), alongside a range of policy and practice recommendations for the government, local authorities and schools that will increase access to free school meals for children and families. The new calculations, which use the October 2020 school census data¹, show that **one in four North East children living below the UK poverty line (over 35,000 children) are not currently eligible for free school meals**, and therefore miss out on the many proven benefits associated with the policy. In addition, more than **one in ten North East children (11 per cent) who are eligible for free school meals do not take up this offer**, meaning they do not benefit from the support that they are entitled to.

If you have any questions, or would like to meet to discuss free school meals in the North East, please contact Amanda Bailey, Director of the North East Child Poverty Commission, on Amanda.Bailey@newcastle.ac.uk.

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¹ All calculations in this briefing use the October 2020 school census data as this is the most recent confirmed data that is available to us. However, we recognise that the number of pupils eligible for free school meals has continued to rise since October and that this is a continuously changing picture.

Key recommendations

1. The government must restore the previous free school meals eligibility threshold (in place prior to April 2018) which included all families in receipt of universal credit. This should also be extended to all those on equivalent benefits.
2. Local authorities should review their free school meal policies, processes and practices to ensure they are maximising the number of families taking up their free school meal entitlement.
3. Schools should work to identify and address any existing policies or practices that either prevent pupils taking up their free school meal entitlement or further disadvantage them.

1. Summary of briefing

Based on the October 2020 school census data, we have calculated that one in four North East schoolchildren who live below the UK's poverty line cannot access a free school meal each day because of the harshness of the current eligibility criteria. These children and their families miss out on the many proven benefits of free school meals, further disadvantaging them in comparison to their better-off peers.

NECPC, Children North East and CPAG believe that all children should receive a balanced school meal each day as a basic entitlement. However, as an immediate priority we urge the government to restore the previous eligibility threshold (in place prior to April 2018) which included all families on universal credit. This should also be extended to those on equivalent benefits. Our analysis shows that this would help to protect thousands of children living in low-income households across the North East from further hardship.

We have also seen how action taken at local authority and school level can make a significant difference to individual families and school funding, and we encourage schools and local authorities to work together to improve and maximise the support that reaches families and pupils.

Increasing access to free school meals won't end child poverty alone, but it will go some way towards supporting children's learning and health outcomes, as well as helping families financially as they recover from the effects of pandemic.

2. New free school meals calculations for the North East of England

a. Free school meals eligibility and child poverty in the North East

There are 389,402 pupils attending state-funded education in the North East of England. Around 131,000 of those children are currently living below the poverty line: that's ten in a classroom of 30. These children live in households that don't have enough money to live at the standard that most other people would expect. However, our new calculations, based on the October 2020 school census data, show that even with transitional protection in place² and universal infant free school meals, **over 35,000 school-aged pupils are currently living in poverty but are not eligible for free school meals** in the North East of England: that's **one in four children in poverty who miss out** on support to receive a hot, balanced meal each day.

² Transitional protection means that no individual child will lose free school meals during the rollout of universal credit, and that once the rollout is complete children will have their eligibility protected until the end of their current school phase.

We calculate it would cost **£38.1 million** to expand free school meals to all households in the North East receiving universal credit (or equivalent benefits) on top of the current status quo. This would benefit an additional 83,000 schoolchildren, many of whom live in poverty.

b. Free school meals take-up in the North East

While the current eligibility criteria means that a quarter of children in poverty in the North East don't qualify for free school meals, there are also some households that are eligible for the entitlement but do not claim it. We estimate the **current take-up rate in the North East is 89 per cent** (116,000 eligible pupils with only 103,000 claiming). It's important to note that the take-up rate has been increasing, but there is still more to be done to ensure that barriers to claiming are removed. We explore this further below.

c. Free school meals eligibility and households with no recourse to public funds

We estimate that another **4,000 school children** in the North East (who are not covered by universal infant free school meals) are in families with no recourse to public funds because of their immigration status. Many of these children will be living well below the poverty line but are not usually eligible for means-tested free school meals. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the government temporarily extended free school meals to include some children with no recourse to public funds who live in households below a certain income threshold.

3. Background information on the current free school meals eligibility criteria in the North East

Families on **universal credit** are currently eligible for free school meals if their family income is below £7,400 (before benefits are taken into account). Families receiving **child tax credit** are only eligible for free school meals if they are not also entitled to working tax credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190. Families qualify for **working tax credit** if they are working a certain number of hours (16 hours a week for a lone parent) and have a low income. The amount of tax credit you get depends on your income. Families receiving working tax credit may be living below the poverty line, but their children are not eligible for free school meals. These existing income thresholds are the main reason so many children live in poverty but don't qualify for free school meals. Seventy-five per cent of children in the UK living in poverty are in working households³ and many of these families fall through this gap, as their household income is above the threshold but they do not earn enough to escape poverty.

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, the new eligibility criteria was introduced in 2018, with the result that families applying for free school meals after 1 April 2018 must have an income less than £7,400 to be eligible.

Table 1 shows the share of school-aged children who claim free school meals in the North East by local authority. We can see that across the North East just over 100,000 children claim free school meals – over 1 in 4 of all pupils. This is the highest rate of any area across England. It is also clear that there is substantial variation by local authority. In Northumberland less than 1 in 5 claim free school meals, while in Newcastle it is over 1 in 3.

³ Department for Work and Pensions, *Households Below Average Income, Statistics on the number and percentage of people living in low income households for financial years 1994/95 to 2019/20, 2021*

The North East has the highest rates of free school meal eligibility compared to other regions, with 26.5 per cent of pupils qualifying for this entitlement in October 2020.⁴

Table 1: Free school meals by local authority

Local authority	Claiming Pupils	% Claiming	Total Pupils
Darlington	3,934	24.7%	15,927
Durham	19,442	26.4%	73,644
Gateshead	6,743	24.8%	27,190
Hartlepool	5,091	33.9%	15,018
Middlesbrough	8,393	33.8%	24,831
Newcastle upon Tyne	14,429	35.1%	41,108
North Tyneside	6,331	20.5%	30,883
Northumberland	8,426	18.7%	45,059
Redcar and Cleveland	5,550	25.9%	21,429
South Tyneside	6,091	27.1%	22,476
Stockton-on-Tees	7,415	24.4%	30,389
Sunderland	11,274	27.2%	41,449
North East	103,119	26.5%	389,402

Note: Author's calculations using Free school meals: October 2020

4. Relationship between free school meals and child poverty

There is clearly a relationship between free school meals eligibility and child poverty (areas with higher rates of child poverty, on average, have higher rates of free school meals eligibility) but the relationship is not clear-cut. This is for a variety of factors:

1. Earnings are not the same as equivalised household income. Child poverty is calculated by looking at total household income, adjusted by the number of people in the household. There are some households with higher earnings who may be in poverty because there are many people in the household. Similarly, there might be households with no/low earnings who are not in poverty because they receive sufficient income from other sources. Housing costs should also be factored in.
2. Some families who are eligible for free school meals do not claim them.

⁴ Department for Education's 'Explore education statistics' service, *Free school meals: Autumn term*, published 30 March 2021

3. Universal infant free school meals mean that some children in poverty who are not eligible/do not claim free school meals still receive free school meals.

Therefore in order to look at how many children in poverty miss out on free school meals, economic modelling from survey data is required. Using this approach, **we estimate the current take-up rate in the North East is 89 per cent** (116,000 eligible pupils with only 103,000 claiming). We are also able to look at the number of children in poverty who are not eligible, both before and after accounting for universal infant free school meals.

Table 2 shows that an estimated 47,000 children in poverty in the North East are not eligible for means-tested free school meals. 11,000 of these are infants and are therefore covered by universal infant free school meals. However, the removal of the universal approach from Year 3 onwards means that **35,800 children in poverty (a quarter of all children in poverty in the region) are not eligible for any form of free school meals.**

Table 2: Children in poverty who miss out on free school meals by local authority

Local authority	Children in poverty who miss out on means-tested free school meals	Children in poverty who miss out on any form of free school meals
Darlington	2,000	1,500
Durham	8,900	6,800
Gateshead	3,400	2,600
Hartlepool	1,600	1,200
Middlesbrough	2,600	2,000
Newcastle upon Tyne	4,300	3,200
North Tyneside	4,100	3,100
Northumberland	6,100	4,700
Redcar and Cleveland	2,600	2,000
South Tyneside	2,700	2,000
Stockton-on-Tees	3,800	2,900
Sunderland	4,900	3,800
North East	47,000	35,800

Note: Author's calculations using Free School Meals: October 2020, Department for Education; Households Below Average Income 2018-19, Department for Work and Pension; Stat Xplore, Department for Work and Pensions

Throughout the pandemic, families with children have been consistently overlooked in the economic support packages from the UK Government. 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. In this context, implementing measures and practices that ensure more support reaches families will be vital in preventing children from being further disadvantaged.

“Unable to claim any free meals. I was registered disabled in May and not able to return to work at present. My Husband is a key worker, working seven days to make ends meet. Due to his increased hours we do not qualify for any further benefits.” (Mum with 1 child in school)

Importantly, we have also seen the crucial role that schools have played over the last year in supporting children and families, beyond learning, with wider pastoral and welfare support. We know that schools understand the needs of their families and are well-placed in their communities to offer this support. It's therefore important that we maximise support through schools, as not all families will be accessing help elsewhere.

Case study

Sarah Dixon, Acting Headteacher of Western Community Primary School in Wallsend, North Tyneside is wholeheartedly behind expanding eligibility for free school meals. Of the 442 children in her school, a third are currently in receipt of free school meals.



“For a number of families in the Wallsend community, struggling with their finances is an everyday problem that has been exacerbated by Covid. We have families who are classed as being just above the threshold to claim benefits, who are managing on zero hour contracts and low income salaries but are without the advantage of free school meals for their children. We know that for these families fuel and food poverty are a real challenge.

“Some of our Governors and staff contribute to a fund set up to support families in crisis and we regularly organise fuel payments, food parcels, uniform and essentials to help families out. Luxuries such as cinema trips, restaurant visits and family days out are few and far between when affording the basics is a struggle. Support for our children is a real community effort with local businesses and charities supporting with food parcels, a breakfast offer and staff and other families organising Christmas hampers.

“We have had a lot of families in the past year who lost their jobs or were furloughed. Some self-employed families have slipped through the cracks, either waiting a long time for a payment or in some cases missing out completely. Usually they are able to provide for their families but this has been a time of stress and uncertainty, having to navigate the benefits system for the first time and in many cases having to borrow to tide them over.

“We feel privileged to work in partnership with a network of local schools alongside the Wallsend Children's Community who are passionate about improving outcomes for disadvantaged children in Wallsend.”

She added that expanding free school meals to lower income families would relieve the financial burden on parents and carers and ensure children had access to a hot nutritious meal each day, which would in turn have a beneficial impact on children's learning in school.

5. The impact of the current eligibility criteria and take-up rates on children and families

Impact of current eligibility criteria

Free school meals, and in particular universal free school meals, have a number of proven benefits and are an effective anti-child poverty measure. They can help to **boost children's learning and attainment**⁵, as well as **supporting their health** through providing a balanced meal each day. Children also **benefit from the social experiences** of sitting down together, eating the same food and sharing the dining hall experience.⁶ For families, free school meal entitlements can **relieve pressures on household budgets** and free up money for other living costs. Expanding free school meals to more children can also **help to tackle inequalities** by decreasing the number of children in low-income families who miss out, and it can **reduce stigma** associated with the entitlement. More broadly, research shows that when children are hungry at school they miss out on learning.^{7,8}

At present, a quarter of children living in poverty in the North East miss out on these benefits, which further disadvantages them.

Case study

"It would make a massive difference if the Government changed the rules on free school meals. It would be one less thing to worry about."

So says Diane (not her real name) who has four children aged eight, nine, 12 and 16 and has to spend around £200 per month on school meals. That's a huge chunk – over 13 per cent – of the family's monthly budget.

"We don't qualify for Universal Credit because my husband works and so the children don't get free school meals. We get by, but the dinners situation is quite expensive. My youngest was in Year 2 during the Coronavirus outbreak and would normally have qualified for free school meals then, but she didn't even receive vouchers.

"Feeding four children during lockdown was expensive – they were just going backwards and forwards to the fridge. With my husband being paid monthly, you owe, you owe, you owe. Extending free school meals would just take the pressure off."

Diane admits she's found it difficult to keep up with payment for school meals and recently received a letter from the school office telling her that if she didn't pay the £32 she owed for her children's meals, then she would be referred to a debt collecting agency.

"I was fuming," Diane said. "I wrote them a strongly worded letter pointing out that we are in the middle of a global crisis. You know you owe it, but couldn't they just wait until the end of the month when my husband gets paid?"

⁵ *Free school meals pilot: impact report*, Department for Education, 2012

⁶ *Evaluation of Universal Infant Free School Meals*, Education Policy Institute, 2018

⁷ *No Fuel to Learn*, Kellogg's, 2021

⁸ *A lost education, the reality of hunger in the classroom*, Kellogg's, 2013

“The head rang and apologised. She said she didn’t mean it to be like that, but it’s really distressing to get a letter saying that if you don’t pay, they’ll forward it to a debt collecting agency.”

Diane has found herself having difficult conversations around school meals with her elder sons because of the expense. “They’re seniors which is even more expensive than the £11 you pay for juniors. They can really buy what they want.

“So if they wanted pizza, chips, a pudding and a drink they could. I put £50 on for the month and my son would have gone through it in no time. He was just spending and spending. I had to tell him I couldn’t keep topping it up. In the end I had to put a cap on it.”

When children miss out on free school meals they also miss out on other support and benefits that are triggered by free school meals eligibility. Most noticeably, free school meals are linked to pupil premium funding. Schools receive pupil premium funding for every child that claims free school meals or has claimed free school meals in the last six years (£1,345 for every primary age pupil, or £955 for every secondary age pupil). In addition, the National Funding Formula (NFF), which is the method the government uses to determine how much money each state school in England receives each year, is, in part, calculated based on the number of pupils eligible for free school meals within the past six years.⁹

Currently, some schools will have a high proportion of children living in poverty, but many of them won’t qualify for free school meals which means the school won’t receive any of this additional funding. We know poverty at home is the strongest statistical predictor of how well a child will do in school¹⁰ but pupil premium funding, which is set up to improve the attainment of disadvantaged pupils, is not accessible to all pupils who are disadvantaged in low-income households.

Free school meals also passports households to other forms of support. For example, the government’s Holiday Activities and Food programme 2021 is targeted at providing holiday provision to children who claim means-tested free school meals, but there is no or limited additional funding to offer provision to families in poverty who aren’t eligible. In some local authorities, families claiming free school meals can apply for uniform grants or help with music tuition – this support is also out of reach for families who are struggling but don’t qualify.

“I am not eligible [for free school meals or other grants] as I work however mine is the only wage to pay for x4 people in the house.” (Mum with 1 child in school)

Impact of eligible families not taking up free school meals

As noted above, schools receive pupil premium funding for every child who claims free school meals or has claimed free school meals in the last six years. If eligible families do not claim free school meals, schools cannot access this funding. We estimate **schools across the North East are currently losing £15m in pupil premium funding** per year because not all families take up free school meals even though they are entitled to them. This is funding that could be used to pay for things like extra teaching staff, breakfast clubs or additional resources like laptops. Importantly, this funding not only benefits eligible children but is often used for initiatives that are helpful for all pupils, meaning that those who are ineligible but living below the poverty line can greatly benefit from schools increasing uptake among eligible pupils.

⁹ *The national funding formulae for schools and high needs 2020-21*, Department for Education, October 2019

¹⁰ K Cooper and K Stewart, *Does Money Affect Children’s Outcomes? An update*, CASEpaper 203, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics, July 2017

“Free school meals is not anonymous and has a low level of uptake because of this.” (Dad with 2 children in school)

In addition, there may be families who are struggling but do not know they are eligible for free school meals and therefore do not claim the entitlement. In CPAG and Children North East’s recent research, *The Cost of Learning in Lockdown (2020)*, families told us that their financial circumstances had changed which left them unaware of whether they qualified for free school meals or not.¹¹ Children in these families are missing out on a meal each day that they are entitled to, and families are left making difficult decisions around household budgets in order to feed their children.

“I don’t know how to ask the right questions for help.” (Dad of four children)

6. Children and young people’s experiences of free school meals

The current eligibility threshold for free school meals is clearly too low. However, even for those children who are eligible, the experience of collecting free school meals and dining at school is not always positive, which can result in children and families choosing not to take up their entitlement. Furthermore, in some cases the administrative system creates further injustices for children. Children North East have worked with schools across the region, listening to the experiences of children and young people. Here are some of the ways pupils have described facing stigma or further disadvantage as a result of the way free school meals are administered and delivered in schools:

- **Some children are short-changed by the free school meals system**, leaving them feeling stigmatised, disadvantaged and

- We heard that some children eligible for free school meals are **not allowed to sit with their friends** who bring in a packed lunch. Some children have explained how they have persuaded their parents to move them onto packed lunches at a cost to the parents.
- Children eligible for free school meals are **not always allowed the autonomy to choose if they spend their free school meals allowance at break or lunch times** as their peers are, and at times this means either going hungry or spending lunch away from their friendship groups.
- In some secondary school canteens, students are **limited on the meal deals they are allowed due to the costs**. For example, in one school a pasta meal deal cost £2.30 and a pizza meal deal cost £2.20. The free school meal allowance was only £2.20 meaning **those receiving free school meals did not have the same choice as their peers**.

We know schools are often acutely aware of the challenges children and families face and make concerted efforts to ensure children in low-income households can fully participate in the school day. However, Children North East's research shows that many schools still unwittingly have policies and practices in place that make children in low-income households feel different compared to their better-off peers.

"Not received anything and don't know what we might be entitled to." (Mum with 1 child in school)

7. Recommendations for improving the current free school meals system

While we believe a universal approach to free school meals has the greatest benefits for all children, and in particular those living in poverty, we have presented a range of policy and practice recommendations for the government, local authorities and schools that would help more families and children in low-income families have access to free school meals and their benefits.

We urge the government to:

1. Restore the previous free school meals eligibility threshold (in place prior to April 2018) which included all families in receipt of universal credit. This should also be extended to all those on equivalent benefits.

We estimate reinstating this policy would see 1.8 million more children nationally benefit from free school meals including **83,000 schoolchildren in the North East of England**. It would cost the UK government an additional £750 million per year to ensure children across the UK 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. We estimate it would cost **£38.1 million per year**, on top of the current status quo, to roll this policy out to families across the North East. A fully universal approach to free school meals in the North East would cost **£74.4 million**, on top of current costs.

2. Make permanent the temporary extension of free school meals eligibility to some households with no recourse to public funds.

Many children with no recourse to public funds live in deep, long-term poverty and this has detrimental effects on their short and long-term outcomes. It is crucial that the temporary extension is made permanent, to support these pupils' health and ability to participate in school life going forward. Taking free school meals away from children who have already been acknowledged to be in need of support

would show little compassion from the government. We estimate that **4,000 non-infant North East schoolchildren** are in families with no recourse to public funds.

3. Commit to maintaining universal infant free school meals recognising the many proven benefits this policy has for the youngest schoolchildren in England.

The universal infant free school meal policy has been proven to increase take-up of the entitlement by all children including those eligible for means-tested free school meals. Our analysis shows that removing this policy would mean an additional **11,000 North East children** living in poverty would miss out on free school meals, alongside many more children who currently benefit. During the Covid-19 lockdowns, schools were not obligated to provide universal infant free meals. Our research with families showed that many relied heavily on this support and struggled when it was not available.¹³

We recommend local authorities and councils:

1. Review their free school meal policies, processes and practices to ensure they are maximising the number of families taking up their free school meal entitlement.

We have identified a number of ways local authorities can, and do, increase free school meal uptake in their areas. Local authorities should:

- **Carry out weekly re-checks on free school meal applications to ensure no family misses out on their entitlement**

All local authorities have access to the Department for Education's Eligibility Checking System (ECS) which provides an online portal for determining household eligibility for free school meals. Local authorities can use this system to check data held by the Department for Work and Pensions, the Home Office and HMRC to establish eligibility. Once families have applied, even if they are ineligible at the time of the application, local authorities can carry out re-checks to establish if the family has become eligible. Some local authorities use this mechanism to successfully increase take-up of free school meals in their area and ensure children and families who are rightfully entitled can benefit from free school meals provision.

- **Work with schools on increasing opportunities for families to apply, as well as streamlining the application process**

Local authorities should be working with schools to encourage and incentivise families to fill out free school meal application forms wherever possible. This includes making it a standardised part of starting school in infant years (ensuring eligible families, who may not otherwise register because they already qualify for a universal infant free school meal, fill out an application form which helps to increase school funding), and by including an application form as part of the in-year admissions form filled out by families when they move to a new area and join a new school. While schools are best placed to collect the application information, local authorities have access to the national electronic system which allows them to check eligibility quickly using an individual's national insurance number. Local authorities can work with schools to provide this service and together, ensure eligible families receive their free school meal entitlement.

¹³ *The Cost of Learning in Lockdown (March 2021 update)*, Child Poverty Action Group and Children North East, March 2021

Case study – Newcastle City Council

Newcastle City Council, and in particular the Children, Education and Skills team, prioritise increasing take-up of free school meal entitlements as part of their efforts to address child poverty in the area. They have implemented a range of policies and practices to help them achieve this, which are driven by two key aims:

1. To maximise the support that reaches individual families, children and young people
2. To maximise the amount of money going to schools in Newcastle through pupil premium and the National Funding Formulae, which in turn helps to support families and children and young people

Here are some of the methods used by Newcastle City Council:

Working closely with schools

Newcastle City Council have continued to work closely with all academies, as well as maintained schools, to ensure as many families as possible take up free school meals. The council offers a buy-back service to academies and free schools to carry out eligibility checks on their behalf, as individual schools do not have full access to the electronic system. The council runs all free school meal applications through the ECS to determine who is eligible. Newcastle City Council have been proactive in setting up this way of working with schools and all but one academy in the local authority use this process.

Maximising support to families and children

Any family that has submitted an application for free school meals (whether eligible or ineligible) will remain on record in Newcastle City Council's free school meals system, Capita. Every week, a staff member uploads all the previously ineligible applications to the ECS to establish whether a family's circumstances have changed and they have become newly eligible. If this is the case, the council informs the school and family immediately. Schools in the area then update their list of eligible pupils and newly eligible pupils start receiving a free meal each day. The amount of money schools receive for free school meals is based on the school census data collected on October census day (as of the 20/21 academic school year). While schools will provide meals to eligible pupils prior to receiving funding for them, it's important that all eligible families are registered in time for census day to ensure schools get the maximum funding they are entitled to. Newcastle City Council works with schools to make sure all families are registered by this point.

Maximising school funding

Recognising that families in infant years are less likely to apply for means-tested free school meals because they already qualify for a free meal each day, Newcastle City Council works with schools to encourage all families to be checked as a standardised part of starting school. Schools in the area promote this to families by outlining the benefits for the whole school e.g. schools will get pupil premium funding for all eligible pupils and can use the additional funding to put support in place that reduces costs for all families and in particular those who might be struggling. Some schools also fund reducing the cost of school meals for families who aren't eligible for free meals but might not be able to afford them.

- **Clearly and regularly promote information about free school meals to families using different methods**

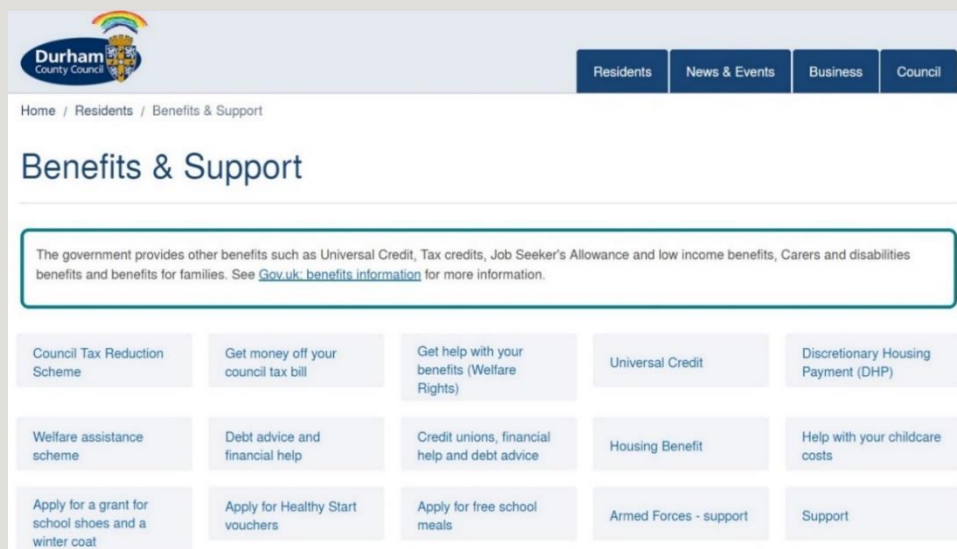
CPAG and Children North East's research during the first lockdown showed that families found it difficult to find information about what financial support they were entitled to, and this included information on free school meals.¹⁴ Local authorities should make information about free school meals easily accessible, and directly linked to their Covid-response pages. This should include clearly promoting the extension of free school meals to families with no recourse to public funds.

2. Promote free school meals alongside other information on benefits and financial support to help families maximise their income.

Families who are looking to apply for free school meals may also be eligible for other entitlements or may benefit from financial inclusion and welfare rights advice. Our research shows that families aren't always aware of what financial support is available to them. However, local authorities can play an important role in linking households to the right support, through effective promotion and signposting. By joining up services and advice, local authorities can help to reduce child poverty in their areas. Similarly, if families are accessing other financial support through the council, such as welfare assistance, debt advice or financial crisis support, local authorities should check free school meals eligibility as a matter of course to maximise the help reaching families who might be struggling.

Case study – Durham County Council

Durham County Council place their free school meals application form on their website in a family-friendly way alongside information about a range of other grants, vouchers and advice that might be helpful to families who are struggling or living on a low income. This way families can easily see what support is available to them without having to search or ask multiple local authority departments for help. Durham County Council implemented this approach as a result of the Council's Poverty Action Steering Group and their commitment to a council-wide approach to tackling poverty.



¹⁴ *The Cost of Learning in Lockdown*, Child Poverty Action Group and Children North East, June 2020

3. Offer child poverty training to school staff to help increase awareness of the issue and help schools identify practical ways they can increase support to families who might be struggling.

While schools are already increasingly aware of the challenges families are facing, it is important that school staff are equipped with a clear understanding of child poverty in their area so they can implement policies and practices that are inclusive and mindful of children living on a low income. For more information about child poverty training for schools, contact Children North East on info@povertyproofing.co.uk.

We encourage schools to:

1. Identify and address any existing policies or practices that either prevent pupils taking up their free school meal entitlement or further disadvantage them.

Through Children North East's *Poverty Proofing the School Day* work, we know that some children don't claim or collect their free school meals because there is a strong stigma attached to it and children can be made to feel different to their peers if they receive a free school meal. Schools can, and do, remove these barriers and improve the school dining experience for pupils. Here are some examples of actions schools can take to improve the experience for pupils claiming free school meals:

- **Back Tyne and Wear Citizens' Just Change campaign** and join other schools in fixing the administration system so pupils eligible for free school meals are able to 'carry over' their unspent free school meals money. Schools across the North East have already proactively implemented this change, including:
 - Venerable Bede CE Academy, Sunderland
 - St Thomas More Catholic High School, North Shields
 - Carmel College, Darlington
 - Our Lady & St Bede Catholic Academy, Stockton-on-Tees
 - St Michael's Catholic Academy, Stockton-on-Tees

Pupil testimonials from St Thomas More RC Academy

Pupils describe the difference it has made knowing that the money they are entitled to will be rolled over to the next day if it's not spent.

"Noticing that money had carried over on my card made me feel that people in society really care about how other people are being treated, thinking about what money, what food you might need if you're not getting enough at home or if your parents aren't getting enough money because of the situation we're in at the minute."

"I feel I don't have to worry as much about asking my parents to add money to my account because now I know I don't have to worry about it because it's getting transferred over and I'm getting it every day. Now that I know I'm definitely getting that money, I'm not worrying about needing lunch – I know I will get it." **Student in Year 8**

“My brother has autism so my Mam has to take extra care of him because he needs that extra care and she needs to put a lot of effort towards him and then later on she’ll think about getting a job but she can’t right now. So if I run out of money and need a bit more for food, it affects my bus fare as well. So if I didn’t have the change, I would be more stuck. Having the money roll over if I’m ill and absent from school is really good because there’s more stuff to buy in the lunch hall. If I didn’t get money carried over and my friends were sitting with massive lunches, I would feel left out really.” **Student in Year 8**

“Having change carried over and money carried over when absent provides the extra funds to help you have a full stomach. This makes you feel better, really.” **Student in Year 11**

- On school trips, **consider providing all pupils with lunches** as standard so that those receiving a free school meal are not identifiable.
- Explore **alternative ways to organise the dining hall** so that pupils’ lunch choices are not influenced by whether or not they get to go in with and sit with their friends.
- Work with catering teams to **offer flexibility around when pupils can spend their free school meals allowance**, enabling pupils to buy food at break time if they are hungry and spend lunchtime with their friends outside of the school premises.
- Work with catering teams to ensure that those collecting free school meals have **the same food choices as their peers** and do not have to opt for smaller portion sizes.

2. Review their free school meals application processes to increase uptake and ensure there are no barriers to families claiming their entitlement.

Like local authorities, schools can help to ensure that families who are eligible for free school meals take up this offer. Schools should:

- **Identify and address the barriers families face when applying for free school meals**

Through consultation with families, schools should understand the barriers to making applications for free school meals (and other financial support) and identify ways to help parents apply; for example, by providing one-to-one support, computer access or using a translator. Schools should allow families to make paper applications, as well as online applications, to ensure those who cannot access an online system can still apply. Schools can also improve take-up by ensuring there is an inclusive and consistent dialogue with families about their financial circumstances.

- **Regularly and consistently promote information about free school meals and advise families on how to apply**

Children North East and CPAG’s research during the Covid-19 pandemic shows that families highly appreciate regular communication about what financial support is available to them and what they qualify for.¹⁵ Promoting free school meal information through different methods e.g. school bag letter drops, social media and newsletters can help the information reach as many families as possible. By encouraging families to apply, the school may be able to increase take-up, but they will also be able to make families aware if they become eligible in the future.

¹⁵ *The Cost of Learning in Lockdown*, Child Poverty Action Group and Children North East, June 2020

“School has included info in newsletters and had a school family officer who can help guide parent through different benefits/ help they may be entitled to.” (Mum with 2 children in school)

- **Encourage families to apply for means-tested free school meals even if they currently receive school meals as part of the universal infant free school meals policy**

Research shows that registration rates for means-tested free school meals are lower than they should be among infant pupils most likely because parents are less inclined to apply if their children already receive a free meal each day.¹⁶ However, this means schools are missing out on valuable pupil premium funding. The same research suggests that take-up of means-tested free school meals in Years 3 - 6 is lower in schools where there are infant children. Schools should proactively encourage families with infant children to apply to ensure the correct pupil premium funding is allocated and children don't miss out on free school meals in the future. Many schools have delivered an incentive scheme to ensure all those eligible receive this benefit. For example, Children North East worked with one school that gave every child a school jumper at the beginning of the year if their parents filled in the eligibility form. This meant that all children were given access to the uniform, and the school benefitted financially from the pupil premium funding they received.

3. Take a whole-school approach to tackling poverty and disadvantage.

The data clearly shows that free school meals eligibility is not an accurate measure of child poverty in schools. We also know that household finances may have changed significantly as a result of the pandemic. Schools should implement 'poverty-aware' policies and practices that reduce financial pressures on all families such as affordable uniform policies, as interventions or support targeted solely at children eligible for free school meals will miss many families who are struggling. We encourage schools to:

- **Take action to identify and address other financial barriers to learning and poverty-related stigma that exist in schools**

There are a number of ways schools can ensure that household income is never a barrier to education. [Turning the Page on Poverty](#) is a resource designed for school staff by Children North East, Child Poverty Action Group and the NEU. It is a practical guide to help schools tackle poverty and the cost of the school day. Schools can also contact Children North East to learn more about their Poverty Proofing the School Day programme.

8. Acknowledgments

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¹⁶ *Impact of the universal infant free school meal policy*, Nuffield Foundation, 2020

9. About us

The North East Child Poverty Commission

The [North East Child Poverty Commission](#) (NECPC) is a stakeholder network of representatives from different sectors in the region, which works to build support for actions that improve the lives of the more than 1 in 3 children and young people growing up in poverty in the North East of England. With an overarching aim to ‘provide a strong regional voice to raise awareness of the issue of child poverty in the North East and to work collaboratively to tackle the problem’, NECPC is hosted by - but independent of - Newcastle University.

Children North East

Children North East is a registered charity that works with babies, children and young people in their families, schools and communities to ensure they grow up to be healthy and happy. In 2019/20 Children North East provided direct support to 3,921 babies, children and young people from across the North East. This included: 323 babies: 277 pre-school children; 416 primary school children; 1,222 secondary school children and 673 young people between 18 and 25 years. A total of 28 different services - including psychotherapeutic work with parents of babies and toddlers; family crisis intervention and mental health counselling for teens and young adults were delivered across the region. In addition, the charity's unique Poverty Proofing the School Day initiative worked with 15,501 primary and secondary pupils in schools around the North East and another 15,623 pupils in other areas of the country. For more information, please visit the website: www.children-ne.org.uk.

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. 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 solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high-profile legal work to establish and protect families' rights. Child Poverty Action Group is a charity registered in England and Wales (registration number 294841) and in Scotland (registration number SC039339). www.cpag.org.uk