



Free school meals in Yorkshire and the Humber

October 2024

Summary

This briefing looks at free school meals (FSMs) in Yorkshire and the Humber, including new statistics on the number of children in poverty in each local authority missing out on this entitlement.

- 70,000 school-age children in poverty in Yorkshire and the Humber do not qualify for FSMs.
- Analysis shows that every local authority (LA) across the region has at least 1,000 children in poverty who miss out, and this rises to as many as 14,000 in some LAs.
- Across Yorkshire and the Humber, schools and LAs are helping to register eligible pupils and extend provision to more families. This is making a difference to the numbers of children benefiting from FSMs.
- Children and young people from Halifax Academy in West Yorkshire explain why they want to see more children accessing FSMs.
- CPAG and The Food Foundation encourage LAs and Metro Mayors to do all they can to increase the number of children benefitting from FSMs, but recognise the different and difficult environments they operate in.
- The responsibility to tackle this issue ultimately lies with the UK government. As a first step, the government must introduce a national auto-enrolment scheme to ensure all eligible children get access to their FSMs entitlement. However, the charities call on the UK government to reform the current FSMs threshold and work towards removing means-testing entirely from the dining hall. This should form part of the work of the government's Child Poverty Taskforce.

1. Introduction

Many children's main daily source of hot, nutritious food is a free school meal (FSM). Healthy, tasty and filling free meals at school provide vital nutrition, helping pupils to concentrate and learn. The benefits of FSMs are not just seen in the classroom. FSMs have a positive impact well into adulthood, with evidence linking them to improved educational attainment and a variety of social, financial and health benefits.¹ The local economy also gains from a thriving school-food system:² serving more meals means employing more staff, as well as increasing the demand on local supply chains when school food is locally sourced.

¹ Lund University, *Free and nutritious school lunches help create richer and healthier adults*, 2021

² The Food Foundation, [*Making the business case for a city council food policy team or lead*](#), 2024

And, in these times of unprecedented financial pressures, FSMs are essential in helping families struggling with mounting bills and food costs.

But we know that provision is currently falling short: the restrictive eligibility criteria in England mean 900,000 children living below the poverty line don't qualify for a FSM at school.³ It is only fair that every child in England has an equal opportunity to learn and to be healthy, no matter where they grow up.

In England today, all children in Reception to Year 2 receive a FSM. From Year 3 onwards, however, a threshold for FSM entitlement comes into force, set at annual household earnings of less than £7,400 (not including benefits and after taxes). The FSM criteria in England are the least generous across the UK nations. Wales has universal provision across all primary schools,⁴ Scotland provides universal provision in Primary 1-5,⁵ and Northern Ireland has an eligibility income threshold of £15,000⁶ – double the level in England – and has promised a consultation on reviewing the criteria.

As a result, many local areas across England are now taking matters into their own hands. FSMs for all state primary school children are being funded across London. Other local areas are also extending access, with pilots being set up across the country, from York to Stockport.⁷ Sadly, not all areas have the funds or resources to be able to extend provision: there remains a stark postcode lottery for children's access to food across England. Local leaders in Yorkshire have the power to take action to help the children struggling the most in the region by calling for FSMs to be rolled out fairly across the country by the UK government.

'I saw my friends are hungry due to not being able to have free school meals, they are very hungry during lessons which really impacts wellbeing, health and education in lessons. Concentration drops, if they were entitled to free school meals they would really appreciate and be grateful for it, as it would support them, and their families' worries would diminish. Ultimately, expanding free school meals is very important as it ensures our children have enough food to learn and grow. Furthermore, it reduces hunger in schools, supports health and improves focus and concentration in lessons. Free school meals are vital for better academic performance and overall well-being. Additionally, it provides beneficial nutrition for children to grow and develop. Overall, children need free school meals for outstanding production in schools.'

Aliza, 15, Halifax

2. FSMs in Yorkshire and the Humber

In recent years, child poverty rates have been rising across the UK. In Yorkshire and the Humber, 29 per cent of children are estimated to be living below the poverty line.⁸ Poverty is a measure of household income (accounting for earnings, social security, housing costs and household size). It does not fit neatly into FSM eligibility, and therefore FSM eligibility is not an accurate proxy for poverty.

³ CPAG, *New official data shows 900,000 children in poverty don't qualify for FSM under national policy*, 2024

⁴ Welsh government, *Universal Primary Free School Meals (UPFSM) guidance*, 2022

⁵ Scottish government, *Check who can get free school meals*, 2024

⁶ NI Department of Education, *Interim change to eligibility criteria for free school meals and uniform grants*, 2024

⁷ The Food Foundation, *Superpowers of Free School Meals Evidence Pack*, 2022

⁸ End Child Poverty, *Local child poverty indicators 2022/23 – estimates of rates, after housing costs*, 2024

Previous analysis by CPAG found that 70,000 school-age children in poverty in Yorkshire and the Humber miss out on national FSMs schemes.⁹ This new piece of analysis provides an estimate of the number of children in poverty who miss out in each LA, as well as totals across combined authorities. Table 1 shows the number of children registered for means-tested FSMs by area and Table 2 shows the number of children in poverty who miss out on national schemes.

Table 1: Number of children who are registered for means-tested FSMs by local authority

Local authority	Children registered for means-tested FSMs
Barnsley	10,238
Doncaster	14,082
Rotherham	12,647
Sheffield	28,005
<i>South Yorkshire</i>	<i>64,972</i>
Bradford	29,485
Calderdale	9,206
Kirklees	17,897
Leeds	34,985
Wakefield	14,173
<i>West Yorkshire</i>	<i>105,746</i>
York	4,246
North Yorkshire	14,518
<i>York and North Yorkshire</i>	<i>18,764</i>
East Riding of Yorkshire	9,207
Kingston upon Hull, City of	14,594
North East Lincolnshire	7,786
North Lincolnshire	7,230
Yorkshire	228,299

Source: Administrative education data comes from Department for Education, *schools, pupils and their characteristics 2023/24*, 2024

Using FSM data alongside household income survey data, we estimate that 70,000 children in Yorkshire and the Humber are currently living in poverty but are not eligible for any form of national FSMs scheme ie, they are not

⁹ CPAG, [The number of children in poverty not eligible for free school meals, by nation and region](#), 2024

eligible for universal infant FSMs or income-related FSMs.¹⁰ Administrative education data and local poverty estimates can then be used to estimate the breakdown of children by LA.

Table 2: Number of children who miss out on any form of national FSM scheme by local authority

Local authority	Children who miss out on any form of FSM
Barnsley	3,000
Doncaster	4,000
Rotherham	3,000
Sheffield	6,000
<i>South Yorkshire</i>	<i>16,000</i>
Bradford	14,000
Calderdale	3,000
Kirklees	9,000
Leeds	10,000
Wakefield	4,000
<i>West Yorkshire</i>	<i>40,000</i>
York	1,000
North Yorkshire	4,000
<i>York and North Yorkshire</i>	<i>5,000</i>
East Riding of Yorkshire	3,000
Kingston upon Hull, City of	3,000
North East Lincolnshire	2,000
North Lincolnshire	2,000
Yorkshire	70,000

Source: Administrative education data comes from Department for Education, *schools, pupils and their characteristics 2023/24, 2024* and Department for Work and Pensions, *Households Below Average Income, 2021/22-2022/23, 2024*. For more details of this calculation see the appendix.

¹⁰ There are an additional 20,000 children living in poverty who do not qualify for means-tested FSMs, but because they are infants (Reception – Year 2) they can access a universal infant FSM.

'Expanding free school meals is vital because it ensures that all students, regardless of their financial situation, have access to nutritious food, which directly impacts their performance in school. When students have access to healthy meals, they are better able to concentrate, learn effectively, and perform well academically. This support not only benefits the students individually but also contributes to a positive and productive learning environment for everyone. It's a win-win situation that not only boosts student success but also fosters a positive and thriving learning atmosphere for all students.'

Rushda, 15, Halifax

3. Recommendations

The current FSM system is clearly not working for children and families, and this is being felt across Yorkshire and the Humber. CPAG and The Food Foundation are calling on the UK government to take the following steps:

1. Introduce a national auto-enrolment scheme to ensure all eligible children get access to their FSM entitlement.
2. Reform the FSM system to ensure no child goes hungry, and work towards removing means-testing from the dining hall entirely.
3. Develop a comprehensive strategy to combat children's food insecurity as part of the Child Poverty Strategy being developed by the Child Poverty Taskforce, including the recommendations above.

While ultimate responsibility lies with the UK government, action can be taken at local level that makes a difference to children and families.

Our recommendations for local leaders are to:

1. Set up a FSMs pilot in your area

There are a number of ways pilots could be set up locally. Examples of models happening around the country are available [here](#). Evaluating these pilots is vital to building the case for FSM expansion nationwide. If you are interested in setting up a pilot, please contact The Food Foundation to discuss options and support.

2. Advocate for extending FSMs nationally

Adding your voice to the call for nationwide extension of eligibility and funding is the best way to ensure that long-term FSM provision reaches children in your area, along with every child in the country.

3. Explore opportunities to expand FSMs using existing Metro Mayor powers

Metro Mayors across England should explore what can be done within existing frameworks to expand FSMs to more children.

4. Support LAs to introduce the opt-out approach to FSM registration

LAs across the country are implementing 'opt-out/auto aware' schemes to ensure children who are entitled to FSMs are registered, and so schools can recover the associated pupil premium funding. More information on these schemes and how to set one up can be found [here](#).

4. Conclusion

Child poverty rates in the UK are currently at a record high¹¹ and are set to increase further if there is no government intervention. Increasing family incomes must be central to supporting children's educational outcomes, and urgent action is needed to get more money to lower-income households and lift families out of poverty. However, poverty is also being compounded in schools at lunchtime. The current FSM eligibility criteria mean hundreds of thousands of children across England who would benefit from FSMs miss out, and this is playing out in LAs all across Yorkshire and the Humber. CPAG and The Food Foundation encourage local leaders to do all they can to help more children access school food. However, access to a filling school lunch should not depend on where you live. As part of the work of the Child Poverty Taskforce, the government must reform the current FSM system to ensure no child goes hungry, and move towards a system where all children are provided a school meal without cost. We know universal approaches to school food work best for children and families, reducing pressures on household budgets, addressing dinner money debt challenges and supporting all children to get on at school.¹²

'The fight against food poverty is not just about feeding the hungry – it's about nourishing hope, restoring dignity, and building a world where no one goes to bed hungry.'

Sabha, 16, Halifax

Appendix: methodology

The poverty measure used is relative after housing costs (AHC). The estimated number of children in poverty who missed out on FSMs was calculated using Households Below Average Income 2022/23. 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, are still eligible for FSMs. 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 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 FSMs in 2022/23 and 2021/22, and applying this share to the 2022/23 total figure (as the sample is too small to use a single year).

¹¹ DWP, *Households Below Average Income: for financial years ending 1995 to 2023, 2024*

¹² CPAG and NEU, *The Universalism Multiplier, 2023*

About The Food Foundation

The Food Foundation is an independent charity working to address challenges in the food system in the interests of the UK public. Working at the interface between academia and policymakers (parliamentarians, civil servants, local authorities, business leaders), we use a wide range of approaches to make change happen including events, publications, media stories, social media campaigns and multistakeholder partnerships. We also work directly with citizens to ensure their lived experience is reflected in our policy proposals. We work with many partners on a range of different thematic areas, working closely with academics to generate evidence and campaigners who can drive change. We are independent of all political parties and businesses, and we are not limited by a single issue or special interest. [foodfoundation.org.uk](https://www.foodfoundation.org.uk)

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. 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 registered charity in England and Wales (294841) and Scotland (SC039339). [cpag.org.uk](https://www.cpag.org.uk)
