

Free school meals in Wales: secondary learners in poverty overlooked

September 2025

Summary

- Latest Welsh government free school meal (FSM) statistics show a fall of 6,000 in the number of children registered for means-tested FSMs in Wales.
- The fall in the number of children registered means that 25,000 children in poverty in secondary schools now miss out on any form of FSM.
- In the future, the number of children in poverty who miss out will rise as transitional protection (whereby once children become eligible for FSM, they still get this entitlement even if their household's earnings have risen above the threshold) is being phased out and the very restrictive earnings threshold of £7,400 remains frozen.
- The Welsh government will receive additional consequential funding from Westminster in 2026/27 due to the roll-out of FSM to all children on universal credit (UC) in England. This additional funding would be more than enough to substantially expand FSM provision in secondary schools in Wales.
- Our wider research shows that universal provision of FSMs works best for children and families, and this should be the ambition for the UK and devolved governments.
- Making provision universal in secondary schools, as it is in primary schools in Wales, would ensure all children can access the benefits of FSMs, supporting their learning, health and their social experiences of the school day. It would have a disproportionate impact on those living in families on a low income, pulling thousands of children out of poverty and reducing the depth of poverty for many more.
- As a bare minimum, the Welsh government must expand FSMs to secondary pupils in households in receipt of UC. This will ensure that almost all young people in poverty or at risk of poverty (many of whom are currently excluded from the entitlement) do not miss out on a meal each day.

Introduction

FSMs are an invaluable tool for reducing the costs faced by low-income families, as well as boosting wider outcomes like school inclusion and educational attainment. In 2021, Wales had the highest share of children in poverty who missed out on a FSM of any UK nation¹ This was because there was no universal FSM provision for any age group at that time, and Wales had the most restrictive means-tested FSMs eligibility criteria (tied with England). The introduction of universal primary FSMs substantially reduced the number of children in poverty who missed out, but many children in poverty in secondary schools still have to pay for a lunchtime meal or packed lunch. This can be challenging –

¹ CPAG and Covid Realities, *Fixing Lunch: The case for expanding free school meals*, 2021

CPAG's previous research shows that paying for food during the school day is one of the biggest costs secondary learners face.²

'[The costs mean] you have to choose whether to be thirsty or hungry.' (Secondary-aged learner, Wales)

Free school meal statistics

The latest statistics show that in 2024/25 there were 116,000 children registered for means-tested FSMs in Wales.³ Figure 1 shows this is a fall of 6,000 from 2023/24, when 122,000 children were registered. 85,000 of the 116,000 are registered because household earnings fall below the restrictive £7,400 earnings threshold. This number has been falling steadily since 2020/21, when 100,000 children were registered for this reason. This is largely because inflation and therefore wages have risen considerably in recent years, while the inadequate threshold has remained frozen.

Despite the earnings threshold being frozen, the total number of children registered for FSMs had not fallen (until 2024/25) due to transitional protection⁴. This has helped ensure many children in struggling families could still get access to a meal even if their household earnings had risen above the threshold.⁵ However, since December 2023, transitional protection has started to be phased out. This means those who are newly eligible for FSMs from 1 January 2024 onwards or meet the criteria as they move into secondary school, will no longer be protected if their circumstances change and their parents earn more.⁶ This means from 2024/25 onwards fewer children will receive FSMs through transitional protection, until eventually no children will.

² CPAG, [The minimum cost of education in the UK](#), 2025

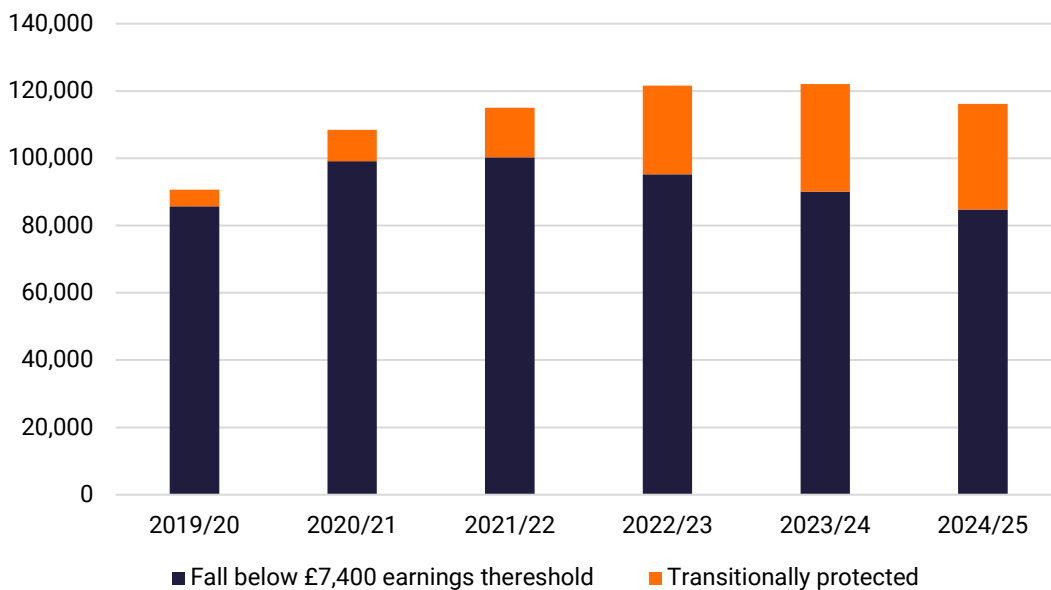
³ Universal primary FSMs are not covered in these stats.

⁴ Transitional protection was commenced in April 2019 alongside the introduction of an earned income threshold for families in receipt of universal credit (UC), which reserved entitlement to free school meals for those in households with annualised net earnings from employment or self-employment of less than £7,400. The [Transitional Protection provisions](#) aimed to protect households migrating to UC from losing their free school meal entitlement despite their household earnings remaining the same. Any child or young person who was eligible for free school meals up to and including 31 December 2023 continued to have their free school meals protected until the end of their current school phase. This applied even if their circumstances changed, and they no longer met the eligibility criteria.

⁵ In addition, the DWP expects most families earning under the universal credit Administrative Earning Threshold (now set at a minimum of £11,400 per year) to increase their earnings.

⁶ Welsh government, [Free school meals: information for local authorities and schools](#), 2025

Figure 1: Number of children registered for FSMs in Wales by year and registration type



Source: Stat Wales, *Pupils eligible for free school meals by local authority, region and year, 2025*

It is possible to calculate the number of children in poverty who currently miss out on FSMs. This is done by combining the Welsh government's FSM statistics, universal primary FSM data, and household income survey data, which form the basis for official poverty statistics.⁷ We find that 25,000 children in poverty in secondary schools in Wales currently miss out. This number will rise in the future as the earnings threshold remains frozen and transitional protection is phased out.

The Welsh government must therefore take action to ensure children in poverty and those at risk of poverty don't miss out on this vital entitlement, especially in light of recent developments in school food policy in Westminster.⁸

Policy context

In June 2025, the UK government announced that from September 2026, FSMs would be rolled out to all children in England in households in receipt of UC. As FSMs are a devolved matter, this policy change does not apply to children in Wales, however devolved governments will receive increased funding following the England expansion through the Barnett formula.

Universal primary FSMs were announced in Wales in September 2022 and fully rolled out by the end of the 23/24 academic year. This is a much wider scheme than universal infant FSMs in England (which provided universal provision to those in reception, Year 1 and Year 2). Through the Barnett formula, the Welsh government will receive additional income from Westminster that relates to children in Year 3 to Year 13 and those in the early years, even though all children in Year 3 to Year 6 are already offered a FSM through the Welsh universal primary FSM policy. Therefore, the Welsh government will have more than enough funding to substantially expand FSM provision in secondary schools.

⁷ FSM data comes from Stat Wales, *Pupils eligible for free school meals by local authority, region and year*. The estimated number of children in poverty who missed out on FSMs was calculated using *Households Below Average Income 2021/22 – 2023/24*. The data is used as the input for UKMOD (tax-benefit microsimulation software).

⁸ From September 2026, almost all children in poverty in England will be eligible for FSMs (except in rare cases eg, they are not eligible for UC because of savings rules or migration status, or because families do not claim UC. This group will be very small and impossible to calculate).

As a bare minimum, rolling out FSMs to all children on UC in secondary schools would mean that almost all of the young people living in poverty, as well as thousands more families just above the poverty line, would have access to a hot meal each day. This would lead to an immediate increase in living standards, reducing the extent and depth of poverty. It would also lead to wider benefits for children.

FSMs can help to boost children's learning and attainment,⁹ as well as supporting their health through providing a balanced meal each day.^{10 11} Children also benefit from the social experience of sitting down together in a shared dining hall and eating the same food.¹²

'I sometimes have to buy my friends their food because they don't have any money in their accounts.' (Secondary-aged learner, Wales)

'Please lower the price of food because some people go home hungry.' (Secondary-aged learner, Wales)

Conclusion

Current FSMs policy in Wales means 25,000 secondary-aged children in poverty miss out on a hot meal each day. This number is set to rise by a third as transitional protection is phased out over the coming years. The UK government has rightly recognised the importance of ensuring children don't go hungry while they're at school. It is vital that the Welsh government uses the additional income it receives as a result of the expansion in England to significantly expand FSM provision to more secondary learners, with universal provision being the approach that works best for children and families.

About CPAG and our sources of evidence

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.

Cost of the School Day – Every Voice Heard is a children's voice and whole school community project exploring the financial implications of schooling for families in Wales. Together, we are helping schools and local authorities identify and overcome cost barriers to education, so that all learners can have an equitable school experience.

CPAG is a registered charity in England and Wales (294841) and Scotland (SC039339). cpag.org.uk

⁹ Lund University, [Free and nutritious school lunches help create richer and healthier adults](#), 2021

¹⁰ Nuffield Foundation, [Impact of the universal infant free school meal policy](#), 2020

¹¹ Wales Centre for Public Policy, [The Effects of Universal Free School Meals](#), 2024

¹² Education Policy Institute, [Evaluation of Universal Infant Free School Meals](#), 2018