Secondary School Free School Meal Expansion

Pre-Budget Briefing - November 2026

Overview

- **With one in five children in Scotland growing up in poverty**, free school meals (FSM) are an important way to reduce household living costs and support children's nutrition, wellbeing and learning.
- The 2025/26 Secondary School Free School Meals Test of Change (ToC) extended FSM eligibility to S1–S3 pupils in eight local authorities whose families receive Scottish child payment. The ToC ended in June 2026, with eligibility in secondary schools reverting to previous more restrictive criteria.[1]
- In the Scottish Government's ToC evaluation[2] **nearly three quarters (74%) of newly eligible parents reported an improvement in their financial situation.** Half saved more than £11 a week, helping cover essentials such as food, bills and clothing. Parents also reported improved wellbeing and reduced mental load. The most commonly reported benefit amongst young people was **feeling less hungry during the school day.** Local authority and school staff agreed that expansion **aligned with child poverty priorities**, helped ease pressure on family budgets and **improved access to food during the school day** for newly eligible pupils, including some who might otherwise have experienced hunger.
- However, while the 2026–31 Programme for Government makes a welcome commitment to further expansion in primary schools, there is no mention of secondary school provision. Currently, due to more restrictive FSM eligibility criteria in secondary schools, thousands of children entitled to FSM in P6 or P7 are losing that support when they enter S1[3], even though their family finances haven't changed.
- **CPAG in Scotland and NASUWT Scotland – the teachers union – are calling on ministers to use the upcoming Scottish Budget to make the expansion permanent and extend free school meals to all secondary pupils whose families receive Scottish child payment**. This will extend benefits identified in the evaluation to more children and families on low incomes. This expansion has already happened in England with all young people in households claiming Universal Credit now entitled to FSM.

[1] In Primary Schools, FSM are available to all P1-5 children and P6-7 children in families claiming Scottish child payment. Glasgow City and Inverclyde Councils provide universal FSM from P1-7. Eligibility for FSM in Secondary schools is less generous, typically for families receiving Universal Credit (where monthly earned income is not more than £995), Pension Credit, income-based Employment and Support Allowance or support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

[2] Free School Meals Test of Change: Evaluation of expanded eligibility for S1-S3 pupils in receipt of Scottish Child Payment - gov.scot

[3] Scottish government have estimated the phased expansion of FSM to pupils in P6 and 7 whose families are in receipt of SCP will support a further 25,000 pupils. https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-government-high-level-action-plan-response-committee-economic-social-cultural-rights/pages/18/

Feedback from the ground

In CPAG's Big Question survey[4] of over 5,000 children and young people, 93% of secondary-aged children said that food was one of the school costs which mattered the most. Young people in the CPAG Cost of the School Day Voice network are vocal about how important free school meals are for equity and 'free school meals for all' featured as one of the calls from thousands of children and young people in their pre-election School Shouldn't Cost manifesto.[5]

"*We think there should be free school meals not just P1-5 but for everyone. It's important to have free school meals beyond P5 because children are growing and they need more food and energy to learn*." (Young person)

It is important that the voices of children and young people and their teachers are heard when it comes tofood at school and FSM policy. CPAG in Scotland and NASUWT Scotland have collated feedback from members, Voice network schools and a school which took part in the ToC expansion to help inform thinking on the future of secondary school FSM provision.

Less support for secondary aged young people

Currently, because of different eligibility criteria for different ages, some young people who qualify for free school meals in P6 and P7 because their families receive Scottish child payment will lose that entitlement when they start secondary school, even if family finances haven't changed.

"This year, which has never happened before, two families got in touch, plus one pupil, three in total, asking for help to try and access the free school meals, thinking they were able to because of the Scottish child payment. And they're not. If you're in P6 and 7 and you get Scottish child payment, you get free school meals. So they were assuming because they still had the same benefits that they would still get it... And we're the front face of that. ***We're the ones that see the families and have to say, no, I don't think you will get it now****. It's sad, you know, it's why we got into this job,* ***we want to help people****. And if they're saying this is what they need and we can't do anything about that, that's a hard position to be in."* (Teacher)

"*I think they should consider like what's going on in your school year. Like if you have big exams or something, you probably need to think more. If you're older, you'll probably need it even more because your bodies are bigger."* (Young person)

Current FSM eligibility criteria in secondary schools mean that families on the lowest incomes can claim support but other families just above the eligibility threshold are missing out.

"I'd a young girl in this week and she was telling me her mum couldn't get free school meals because she got 40 pounds too much a year. The 40 pound is only going to pay for that young girl's school dinners for a month. You know, they need ten pounds on their cards for a week so for the mum, being 40 pound and then not to get school dinners for a year, I think... no. And that's because that mum's pay is that low but she's just over the threshold." (School Family Link Worker)

"There's our [FSM] registered families who are lowest of the low income but most of our families are that middle ground who are on minimum wage, who are still getting universal credit but still don't qualify for free meals. The kids are at least 3, 4 pounds for one single meal and then that's only their lunch, never mind something for their break, for their breakfast. [FSM allowance], it's not a lot but it's still a help for families." (School Family Link Worker)

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[4] Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in Scotland, 2025, *Cost of the School Day Big Question report and film*.
[5] Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in Scotland, 2026, *School Shouldn't Cost: The Young People's Poverty and Education Manifesto 2026–31*, call 3

How hunger is affecting children at school

Young people have told us how not having enough to eat during the school day leaves them with less energy to concentrate, do their best and enjoy time with friends. Teachers are well aware of the effects of hunger in the classroom, and how quickly easy access to food can make a difference.

"*If we don't have enough food in school we don't have any energy, we're grumpy and* ***struggle to focus on our learning or don't have as much fun with our friends***. *Hunger impacts on your learning*." (Young person)

"When we do see a young person who is not regulating or who is not in class, one of the first questions will be, do you want a cereal bar? And the answer is invariably yes, and they scoff it. And I think ***some of the disengagement with class and the not regulating behaviour, hunger is part of it*** *and you can rule that out quickly if you give them something to eat and then you can focus on other kind of underlying causes or whatever. It's one thing you can do, and I would say 7, 8 times out of 10, you see a difference straight away."* (Teacher)

"During the FSM pilot classroom dynamics were slightly better, there seemed to be more energy." (Teacher)

"We saw changes in pupil behaviour when breakfast and break clubs were funded." (Teacher)

"If you're not having enough money to go and get lunch then that can affect your learning and it can also affect how you feel... I feel like if you're eating more, then you're more likely to focus in class and you're more likely to get to ***better in tests*** *and then because you're doing better in tests you're going to feel good about yourself."* (Young person)

Impact of FSM expansion for families receiving Scottish child payment

Newly eligible young people told us that the free school meals expansion saved their families money and made lunch straightforward and worry free. Teachers said it reached pupils who had previously missed out, eased pressure on families and meant pupils could get a hot meal without worrying about what they could afford, helping them concentrate.

"As a professional you kind of observe a lot and there are children that you might have thought maybe would be entitled to it [FSM] but then when you look on the system, they're not. And they were the ones that were included in the test of change." (Teacher)

"*The teachers in our school really, really care about the young people, really, really care about their wellbeing, because they know that the most important thing we do as teachers is make sure that they're okay. And if they're not fed, if they look hungry or they look cold and they look undernourished, that's upsetting as a member of staff to have those children in front of you and be trying to teach them quadratic equations or a critical essay. You know,* ***they can't concentrate, they can't think that through and their brain's not going to be working as well***. *And then to say, right, well, we're giving them a bagel in the morning and then they're going to be getting a hot lunch, it's a really great feeling."* (Teacher)

"I think it just like ***saved a lot of money****, like not having to buy stuff and put money on accounts."* (Young person)

"The Parent Council were delighted and just so happy for the school, they were talking about the price of the canteen and ***how expensive it was if they had multiple children at the school***." (Teacher)

"Just seeing children have a hot lunch is a massive impact. Seeing kids with their heads held high going up to the canteen, ***knowing they can get something and knowing they're not going to have a conversation***

***about debt or have a conversation about 'you can't afford this', which is awful**. So having that assurance that they were going to get that every single day was great."* (Teacher)

*"**My dad was never having to worry about it**, me not having something because there was like a couple of times [before] they didn't put anything on [my card] and then I couldn't get anything for lunch because I didn't have any money."* (Young person)

*"During the pilot **more pupils were eating in the canteen** than 'going down the road'."* (Teacher)

Impact of FSM extension ending

When the ToC ended and FSM eligibility reverted to previous criteria, families who lost access had to make room for lunch costs again in already stretched budgets.

"***It throws everything else off balance**. If you spent a full year not budgeting that [lunch] into your paycheck and also with like the **cost of living going up**, then you're having to add in another extra thing into your budget that you might not have."* (Young person)

*"[Since the end] I've had a mum saying, look, you know, can we get this? Because I'm really struggling. And then another mum saying, I don't know what to do. You know, I can only manage a packed lunch, but I really want her to get something hot. It's kind of **highlighted the issue of hunger** again and the fact that this was a big lifeline for a lot of families and without it, the kids are hungry again and the families are struggling again. Yeah**, it's a bit deflating**. Families, some of them with multiple children, will have been budgeting with that taken care of and now that's back on their plate."* (Teacher)

"It's just I don't see the point in giving it to us and then just taking it away like. It feels unfair that they can just do that so easily." (Young person)

"*We've actually **used our PEF money** for two individuals who didn't qualify for free school meals, but their situation is so dire and, you know, they're asking their friends to buy stuff for them, their friends were coming to us to say we're worried about this child. But that's expensive, it's going to cost us about 500 pounds per pupil a year. So that's a big chunk of our budget, you know."* (Teacher)

Looking ahead: what can make FSM expansion in secondary schools successful?

The evaluation identified challenges around FSM expansion in secondary schools, many of which are echoed by the young people and teachers we hear from:

"*I know a lot of people get stressed out in the queues because they're very squashed and everyone just pushes and skips*." (Young person)

"*The infrastructure wasn't there. We asked the kids who don't use the free school meals, like, why do you not want to? And they'll say, I don't want to waste my full break or my full lunch. Because if you are waiting for like half an hour, you only have like 10 minutes to sit. Then you might have to like do other things. You might have like a test next period and then you have to study for that. Then you won't eat*." (Teacher)

However, the evaluation also very clearly sets out what needs to be in place to meet these challenges and support further expansion, including improved data sharing and application arrangements, communication, sufficient catering capacity and a school meal offer that is accessible and appealing for young people. We can learn from the schools that worked hard to make the ToC successful:

"*The first week when we were still getting round assemblies and people, it was like 40 odd percent [taking up FSM they were newly eligible for] and then the next week it was 70, over 70% and then it didn't dip below 70% the whole year, 83 was our high point I think. This was the additional kids, not the ones that were*

*getting it anyway… I would say that individual one to one [conversations with young people] probably had the biggest change**. I think the majority picked it up from the sort of whole staff communications, but some of the most vulnerable, it was more beneficial to speak to them individually** because they didn't know about it or they had some kind of barrier, whether it was their PIN or they thought they had to get the app to use it or they had various misconceptions so speaking to them individually definitely helped."* (Teacher)

*"We need to **reduce the stigma** around free school meals, making sure people know that they can qualify and apply for it."* (Teacher)

Hopes for the future

"I just think this [temporary expansion] *was great, like this was absolutely brilliant, if it could ever happen again. Even if it can happen in S1, you know, just to give a bit of transition time."* (Teacher)

"I just think they should bring it [FSM extension] back." (Young person)

*"It would just be great if there was something free, whether it's free fruit or free soup that was for everybody, because there's young people that we know that fall through the cracks, maybe they're care experienced, maybe they're immigrants, so they don't qualify for the entitlements. So **universal supports that scoop everybody up**".* (Teacher)

"I think it is a very good use of taxpayers' money." (Teacher)

THE TIME TO ACT IS NOW

Scotland has made significant progress in expanding free school meals in primary schools. That ambition must now extend to secondary schools.

The Scottish Government's evaluation shows that the ToC expansion in secondary schools eased pressure on family budgets, particularly for single-income households and larger families. It also helped young people feel less hungry during the school day and less worried about whether they could afford lunch.

CPAG in Scotland and NASUWT Scotland are calling on ministers to make the recent ToC expansion permanent and, as a minimum, extend free school meals to all secondary pupils whose families receive Scottish child payment. This is a step towards universal provision so that no child goes hungry during the school day.

Extending eligibility must go hand in hand with investment in staffing and catering facilities, so that meals are easy to access and appealing to young people.

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