



Children and Young People's Overview & Scrutiny Committee

7 January 2022

Take Up of Free School Meals (FSM)

Report of John Pearce Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose

- 1 The purpose of this briefing report is to provide members of the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee (CYP OSC) with information relating to eligibility and take up of free school meals in County Durham. The report also provides information on the steps taken to encourage families to apply for FSM, what the impact on schools where families don't apply for FSM in relation to pupil premium (PP); and what support is given to families who are claiming FSM when their children are not in school such as during school holidays or periods of absence.

Executive Summary

- 2 Information taken from the National School Census (2021), indicates that 20.8% of pupils were known to be eligible for free school meals. However, Department for education (DfE) for Spring/Summer 2021 indicates that 27.4% of pupils aged 4-18 in state funded schools in County Durham were eligible for free school meals. DfE reports show in 2021, in County Durham 15,445 (76%) of those eligible took a FSM meal. This is compared to 82% both nationally and regionally.
- 3 Families in County Durham who are eligible to claim FSM are actively encouraged to so by a variety of means such as anonymity of students claiming FSM; encouraging schools to use DCC's checking system; unambiguous information through text message and newsletters. Also

extending lunchtime period so those who may not have had breakfast can have a mid morning snack; multi agency approach to encourage FSM application with focus on families facing financial difficulties.

- 4 Currently families eligible to claim FSM are protected until 2023 regardless of a change to their financial circumstances. Some families have a fear of claiming FSM due to the perceived stigma. Some pupils choose not to take their FSM due peer pressure, menu choice and time constraints.
- 5 Pupil Premium is a grant received by schools for disadvantaged children or children from families serving in HM Forces. It is calculated on a based on the number of children claiming FSM in the school.
- 6 Following a pilot exercise during the Summer break 2021 for one primary and one secondary a Welfare Assistance Team offering financial advice and benefit checks that ensured families are receiving the benefits to which they are entitled. This pilot has resulted in a number of families claiming FSM and additionally other relevant benefits.

Recommendation

- 7 That Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the content of the report and comment accordingly.

Background

- 8 During the global pandemic in 2020 Members have raised concerns about the eligibility and take up of Free School Meals in County Durham. At its meeting on 23 July Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed its work programme for 2021/22 and included within it was an item of Free School Meals.
- 9 As a result of the pandemic and the national interest through campaigns such as Marcus Rashford's food poverty and feeding children during school holidays, there has been an increased awareness of FSM and more parents have come forward to say they believe they are eligible to receive free school meals.

School Census Information

- 10 National School Census data (2021) indicates 20.8% of pupils were known to be eligible for free school meals, which is an increase from 17.3% in 2020 and from 15.4% in 2019.

- 11 Department for Education data (spring/summer 2021) shows 20,316 (27.4%) pupils (aged 4 – 18) in in state-funded schools in County Durham were eligible for FSM.
- 12 The most recent data (October 2021) showed 20,962 children (aged 4 to 18) were entitled to FSM in Durham in, which was 29.6% of the total number on roll.
- 13 DfE reports show in 2021, in County Durham 15,445 (76%) of those eligible took a FSM meal. This is compared to 82% both nationally and regionally.

Schools Census data, October 2021

School Type	No on roll	FSM	% FSM
Primary	38,159	12,253	32.1
Secondary	26,571	7,366	27.7
Special	1,694	925	54.6
6 th Form	4,227	418	9.8
Total	70,651	20,962	29.6
Nursery (maintained)	732	247 (Early Years Pupil Premium)	33.7

Encouraging Families to apply for free school meals

- 14 Families are actively encouraged to register for FSM. This is promoted through a variety of methods including:
 - The use of biometric systems in schools (mainly secondary) so that FSM eligible pupils / students are not identifiable and therefore reduce any stigma
 - Durham County Council (DCC) encouraging schools to use the FSM eligibility checking system (through the Catering Support Team) so that families do not have to produce benefits related paperwork and take this to admin within a school
 - Schools sharing clear and simple information on their websites, through text messaging and newsletters about the benefits of FSM / Healthy Start vouchers and how to apply. Parents are also

encouraged to apply for FSM as this supports school access Pupil Premium (PP) funding.

- Extending the lunchtime period in secondary schools so that students can use their FSM entitlement for mid-morning break, this especially benefits pupils that may not have had breakfast.
- Linking with other services / partners (e.g., One -Point) to encourage FSM applications / uptake from families facing financial difficulties
- Promoting FSM criteria and how to apply on DCC website
- Schools introducing a 'free' breakfast for any FSM pupil, to encourage pupils/ families to apply for FSM.
- Encouraging families to apply for FSM so they can access support for winter clothing and shoes from the Benevolent Fund and other educational activities such as school trips, music tuition etc.

Barriers to families applying for and pupils taking free school meals

- 15 The financial circumstances for some families eligible for free school meals can change over time. Under the current criteria families eligible for FSM remain 'protected' until 2023 even if their financial circumstances change. Several families report that despite remaining eligible they no longer wish their child to take a FSM.
- 16 Perceived or enacted stigma is considered by head teachers to be one of the biggest barriers to increasing take up of free school meals as some families have negative preconceptions of the FSM system, believing that school staff would have access to their financial information. Schools are encouraged to use the FSM eligibility checking system to reduce the need for school staff to check benefits related paperwork.
- 17 Pupils and families choosing not to take a FSM do so for several reasons including food preferences, pupils choosing to do what friends and peers do, the broader lunchtime experience e.g., having to queue, menu choices etc. Schools are encouraged to regularly review their FSM take up and where relevant put an action plan in place.

Pupil Premium (PP)

- 18 This grant provides additional funding that publicly funded schools in England use to support disadvantaged pupils. The pupil premium grant

provides funding to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils of all abilities to reach their potential and to support children and young people with parents in the regular armed forces.

- 19 Pupil Premium is paid to schools based on the numbers of FSM pupils within the setting. For pupils reception to year 6 recorded as Ever 6 FSM, the current rate is £1,345 per year, per child. For pupils in years 7 to 11 recorded as Ever 6 FSM, the rate is £955 per child.
- 20 Pupils in year groups reception to Year 11 recorded as Ever 6 service children or in receipt of a child pension from the Ministry of Defence the service pupil premium rate is £310 per pupil.
- 21 It is in a school's best interest to register as many FSM pupils as possible, as for some schools this can make a significant difference to their overall budget. Most schools actively encourage families to register for FSM when pupils are starting school and have robust systems in place to monitor ongoing FSM eligibility.

Support given to FSM eligible families when their children are not in school such as during school holidays or periods of absence

- 22 Prior to the October 2020 half term, on the back of the Government withdrawing the national school holiday voucher scheme, the council provided free school meal eligible families with a cash out voucher to the value of £15 per free school meal eligible child on an application-based scheme that was targeted. In total 10,418 children were supported.
- 23 On 8 November 2020, following significant pressure over the withdrawal of the previous voucher scheme the Government announced there would be funding in the form of a Winter Grant Scheme that will apply from 1 December 2020 to 31 March 2021 and be administered by local authorities.
- 24 To receive the Winter Grant Vouchers in December 2020 and February 2021 families had to be registered as eligible for free school meals through school systems, as vouchers were distributed via education settings. Using this system encouraged families who had not previously applied for Free School Meals to do so. These vouchers were valued at £20 per child per week to support food and fuel costs.
- 25 Vouchers to support families with food and fuel have continued to be made available to FSM eligible families from the DWP Household Support Grant in the lead up to Christmas 2021. Vouchers valued at

£60.00 will be made available to all eligible pupils. The vouchers can be redeemed at a supermarket of the parent/carer's choice.

- 26 Below is an indication of the activity that took place to support FSM eligible children in the lead up to school holiday periods. Please note the overall numbers include additional vulnerable families and covers the 0-19 age group.

Period	Activity Details	Total expenditure
December 2020 - March 2021	Support over the Christmas holiday period - £40 per child (£20 per child per week). 21,118 vouchers redeemed.	£844,720
March 2021 – April 2021	Support in the run up to the Easter break - £40 per child. 21,319 vouchers redeemed	£852,760
April to June 2021	Support in the run up to the May Half Term - £20 per child. 18,220 vouchers redeemed	£364,400
June – September 2021	Support in the run up to the summer break - £80 per child. 20,670 vouchers redeemed	£1,653,600
Total		£3,715,480

Pupils eligible for FSM who must stay at home due to Covid

- 27 Under normal circumstances, schools do not provide free school meals to eligible pupils who are not in school. During the Covid outbreak, DfE requirements state schools are expected to continue to support pupils eligible for FSM who are isolating at home with quality lunch parcels during term time.

Holiday Activities with Food Programme (HWF)

- 28 In addition to the food/fuel vouchers children and young people have been able to access the holiday activities with food programme during each holiday period. Any child taking part is provided with nutritious and healthy food as part of the activity.

- 29 During the summer 2021 school holiday period 128 HWF projects took place and 19,127 children and young people engaged in the holiday activities programme, of which 48% were eligible for FSM and 984 children had additional needs.

Future Actions

- 30 A pilot exercise carried out in two schools in the summer term 2021 (1 primary 1 secondary) where the Welfare Assistance team offered bespoke 'financial advice' and benefit checks to ensure families are receiving their entitlement. This pilot resulted in a number of families receiving FSM as well as other relevant benefits. Welfare Assistance are currently looking into the feasibility of rolling this out into more schools.
- 31 Awareness raising with school staff on the support available to families facing financial difficulties, including applying for and accessing FSM took place during the spring to summer terms 2021.
- 32 Holiday activities with food will remain during the school holidays and will continue to target and support FSM eligible pupils. A further round of vouchers will be made available in spring 2022 to families eligible for FSM.

Conclusion

- 33 The local authority will continue to monitor and support schools and educational settings regarding free school meal eligibility, applications and take-up.

Data Sources:

Durham Insight <https://www.durhaminsight.info/free-school-meals>

DfE data on FSM eligibility and take-up <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/fast-track/517a5780-5d10-4eed-9571-471f6bb23fde>

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Not applicable.

Finance

Not applicable.

Consultation

Not applicable.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Not applicable.

Climate Change

Not applicable.

Human Rights

Not applicable.

Crime and Disorder

Not applicable.

Staffing

Not applicable.

Accommodation

Not applicable.

Risk

Not applicable.

Procurement

Not applicable.