



Policy in Practice

# Tackling child hunger by auto enrolment in Free School Meals

Wednesday 26 June 2024

# Housekeeping

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- Audio check
- Please ask questions throughout
- Poll and a short survey
- Aim to finish by 11.45
- Slides and recording will automatically follow
- Connect with us on X [@policy\\_practice](#) and LinkedIn (search policy-in-practice)



# We empower people

A woman with dark skin and curly hair is sitting and looking at a laptop. Another woman with light skin and blonde hair is sitting next to her, also looking at the laptop. They are both wearing casual clothing. The background is a solid green color with some faint circular patterns.

## Policy

Missing out: £23 billion of support is unclaimed each year

## Practice

We close the unclaimed support gap with data

# Agenda

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- Eligibility for Free School Meals - The National Picture
- Food Poverty - Free School Meals and the Impact of the Housing Support Fund
- Case Study from **Lewisham Council**
- Data-Driven Solutions to Societal Change
- Q&A Discussion



# Today's speakers

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**Sophie Kaye**  
Senior Marketing Executive  
Policy in Practice



**Rachael Walker**  
Director of Policy  
Policy in Practice



**Mia Polovina**  
Data Science and Insight  
Lead  
Lewisham Council



**Abigail Everett**  
Client Services Manager  
Policy in Practice



# Rachael Walker

## Policy in Practice



# 1 in 4 children are eligible for Free School Meals

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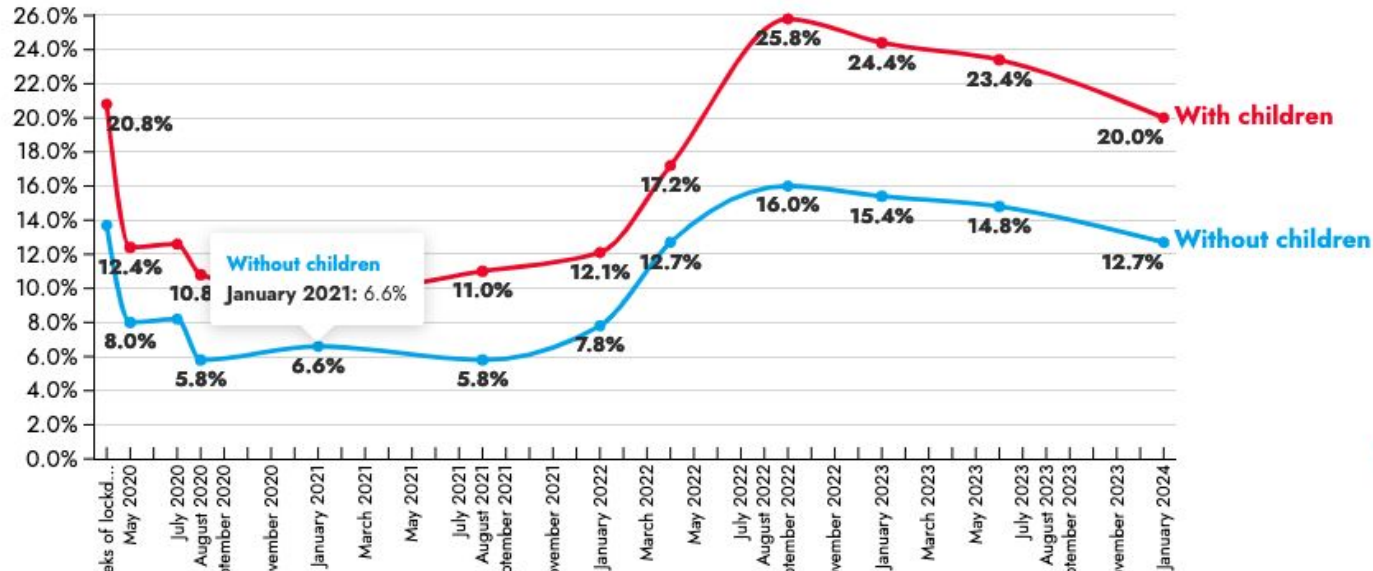
- **29%** of children are living in poverty (JRF, 2024)
- **47%** of children from Black and minority ethnic groups (CPAG, 2023)
- **24.6%** of pupils are eligible for free school meals, up from 23.8% in 2022. (DofE, 2024)
- Around **1.3** million infant children receive Universal Infant Free School Meals - **UIFSM** (DofE, 2024)
- **900,000** children missing out due to eligibility requirements (CPAG, 2023)
- **470,000** missing out despite eligibility (Policy in Practice, 2024)
- **1 in 5 schools** are running food banks. This rises to **1 in 3** schools in deprived areas (Baker et al, 2024)



# 1 in 5 households with children experience food poverty

20.0% of households with children reported experiencing food insecurity compared with 12.7% of households without children

Percentage of households experiencing food insecurity\*:





# £600m in lost pupil premiums

- **£2.58** per meal per pupil: £490 a year for 190 free school meals
- **£1,480** pupil premium funding per pupil for primary schools
- **£1,050** pupil premium funding per pupil for secondary schools

**Our analysis estimates that around 470,000 pupils are missing out on FSM.**

**This is around £600 million a year in missing pupil premium funding**



## Missing out 2024: £23 billion of support is unclaimed each year

Policy in Practice finds that the total amount of unclaimed income related benefits and social tariffs is now £22.7 billion a year

Authors: Deven Ghelani, Rachael Walker  
Contributors: Janet Harkin, Rory Ewan, Kate Collins, Zoe Charlesworth, Jack Rowlands



[policyinpractice.co.uk](https://policyinpractice.co.uk)

April 2024



# UC households must earn less than £7,400 a year

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- Income Support
- income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
- income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- the guaranteed element of Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit (provided you're not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190)
- Working Tax Credit run-on - paid for 4 weeks after you stop qualifying for WTC
- **Universal Credit - if you apply on or after 1 April 2018 your household income must be less than £7,400 a year (after tax and not including any benefits you get)**
- **£7,400 in April 2018 is now worth £9,356** (Bank of England, 2024)

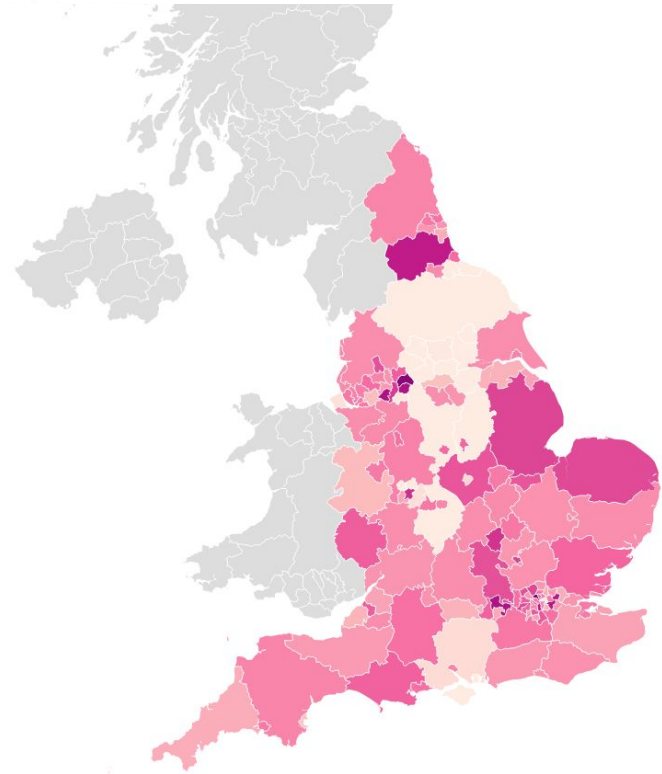


# £156m on holiday FSM

Collectively, **87% of councils with HSF funding** (130 out of 150) spent a staggering **37% of HSF3**, worth **£156 million**, on Free School Meal support during school holidays between October 2022 and March 2023, when there were around five weeks of school holidays.

If HSF3 allocations are repeated in England for HSF5, councils will need to allocate nearly **60%**, or **£240 million** of their funds, to holiday hunger.

Percentage (%) spend on Free School Meals support in the holidays for the Household Support Fund 3 by Authority for the period 1 October 2022 to 31 March 2023



# More data sharing and less stigma please

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- ☒ Administrative complexity
- ☒ Stigma
- ☒ Lack of awareness
- ☒ Fragmentation



# Mia Polovina Lewisham Council



# Free School Meals auto-enrolment in Lewisham

Mia Polovina, Data Science & Insight Lead  
[mia.polovina@lewisham.gov.uk](mailto:mia.polovina@lewisham.gov.uk)

# Free School Meals (FSM) – Context

Free school meals (FSM) is an important component of the support provided to low-income families

Around 11% of children eligible for FSM are not currently registered or taking up FSM

## Reasons for not taking up FSM

- Paperwork/bureaucracy of having to apply
- Low awareness, language barriers
- Stigma or embarrassment

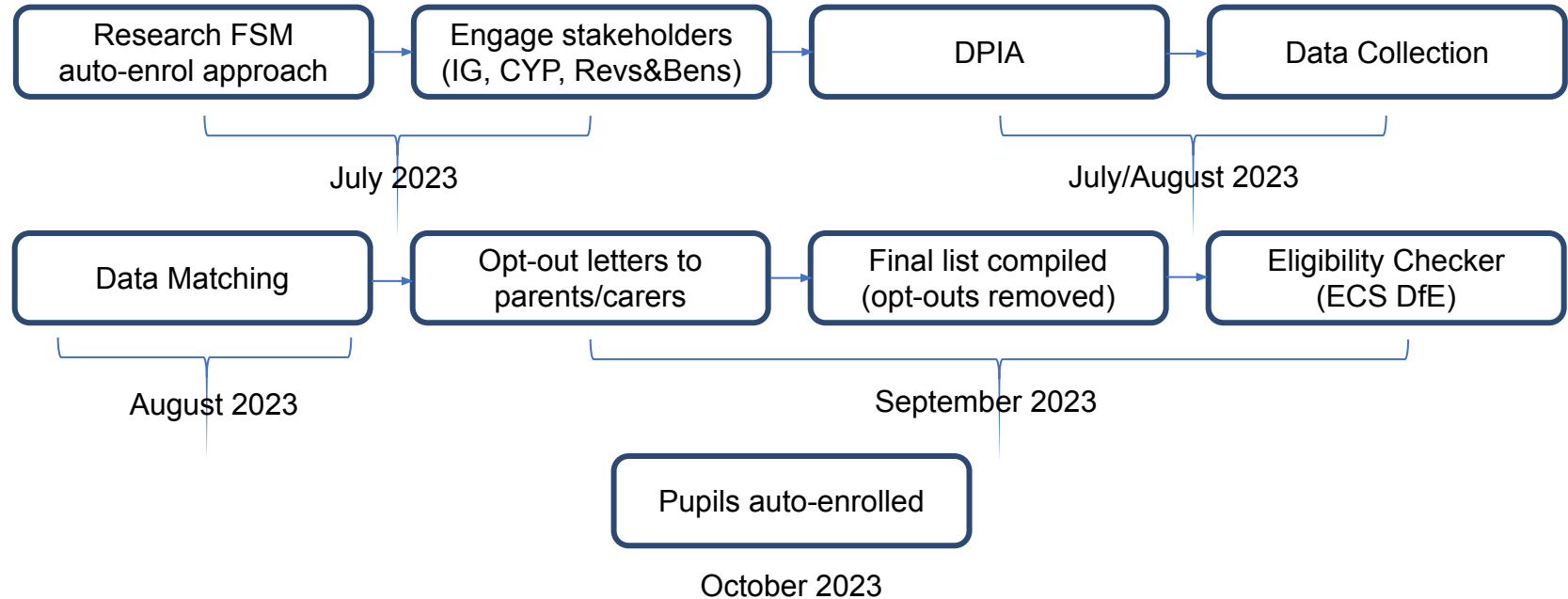
Schools unable to claim pupil premium and other important funding  
Children missing out on healthy meals  
Families missing out on extra funds

# Lewisham FSM auto-enrolment pilot

- July 2023: Tasked to look at uptake of FSM and pilot auto-enrolment
- Pilot run in advance of October 2023 School Census
- Adopted Sheffield City Council approach – ‘opt-out / auto enrolment’
- Lead by Data Science & Insight Team
- Stakeholders: IG, CYP, Revenues & Benefits
- Great example of cross-collaboration between different services and teams within Lewisham and with neighbouring Boroughs



# FSM auto-enrolment pilot – timeline and process



# FSM auto-enrolment DPIA

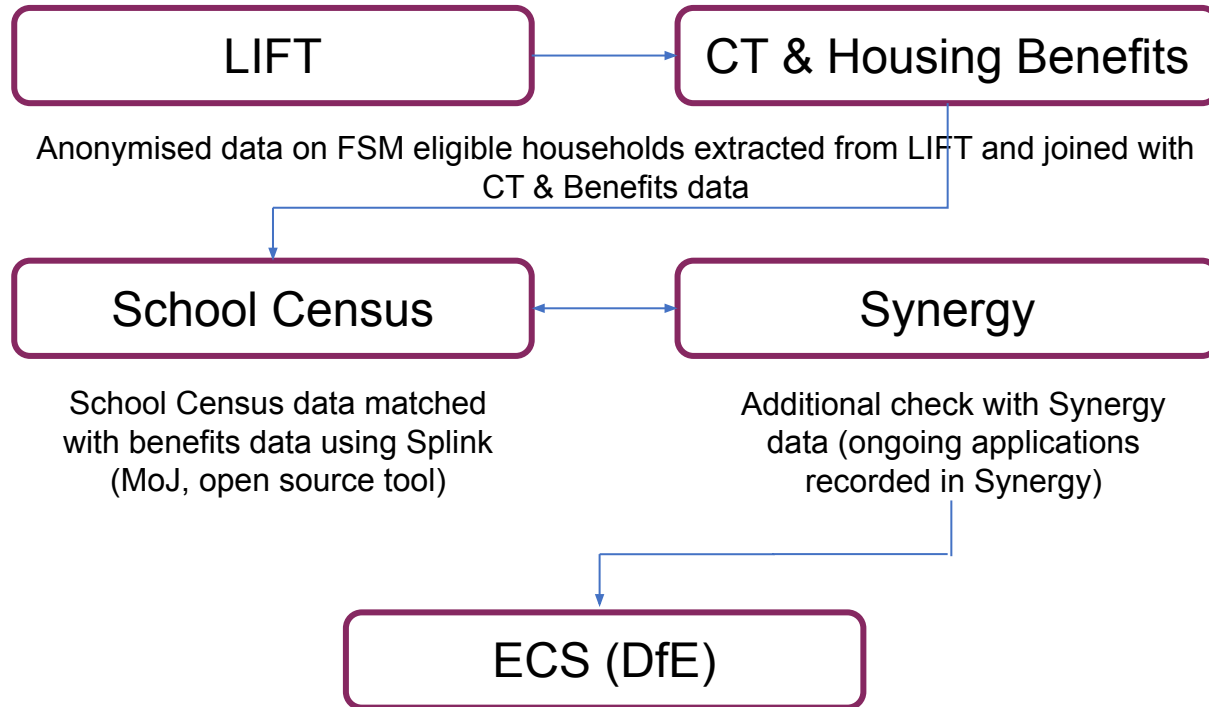
We must ensure appropriate use of personal data and have data protection impact assessment (DPIA) in place to provide justification for data processing.

Education Act 1996,  
Section 512

Digital Economy Act  
2017

Public Task

# FSM auto-enrolment data



# FSM auto-enrolment impact and costs

- Auto-enrolled around 560 pupils (October 2023 and January 2024)
- Children getting healthy meals
- Benefits for families
- £1.2 million in “Pupil Premium” funding for schools (plus January cohort Census October 2024)
- Postage costs: around £800 (October 2023) & £450 (January 2024)

NEWS: POVERTY

SCHOOLS WEEK EDITION 336 | FRIDAY, OCT 20, 2023

DO YOU HAVE A STORY?  
CONTACT US: NEWS@SCHOOLS.WEEK.CO.UK

## London borough's £800 exercise results in £1.2m school funding boost

FREDDIE WHITTAKER  
@SCHOOLSWEEK

EXCLUSIVE

Schools in a London borough will be £1.2 million better off next year after their council trialled an “opt-out” exercise for free school meals that it estimates cost just £800.

And a second council has raised £84,000, prompting fresh calls for a system of auto-enrolment for all eligible pupils.

Lewisham in south London identified more than 500 eligible families through data analysis across its education, IT, revenues, benefits and communications teams.

It then informed parents it would apply on their behalf unless they opted out.

The crisis is usually on families to apply to their local authority. Although schools and councils often encourage parents to enrol, they do not have access to full eligibility data.

Lewisham will now receive a massive £1.2 million extra pupil premium funding in 2024-25.

Freddie Ghoshal, the council's executive director for children and young people, said it was a “fantastic outcome for not just our schools but hundreds of families in the borough”.

“This extra £1.2 million will provide not only a healthy nutritious meal for hundreds more children every day, but will also help fund extra staffing, equipment and support in the schools that support those families”.

The Local Government Association has repeatedly called for auto-enrolment, which it said would benefit 255,000 extra pupils. This would likely amount to at least £268 million in extra funding for schools.

At the time, Shaun Davies, chair of the LGA's resources board, said that “streamlining and removing the red tape in the applications process, so that councils get given the information they need, is vital if we are to ensure no child misses out on a healthy meal”.



Automatic enrolment was also recommended by Henry Dimbleby in the national food strategy. It stated that the government “has data on which families receive benefits that qualify them for FSM, but this is not shared with schools”.

The government had said auto-enrolment was “unviable for reasons of data protection”. But the Dimbleby report added: “It cannot be right to let paperwork stand between a child and a hot meal”.

Lewisham's scheme was trialled prompted by free eligible families would not apply because of the extension of universal free school meals to all primary children in London.

Officials feared eligible families “would not understand the need” to apply if their child already received free meals via the expansion scheme.

The opt-out scheme, which a spokesperson said had been a “huge success”, will now be extended to other services.

The council estimated the exercise cost £800 for postage parents, although this did exclude “indirect” staff costs that have not been calculated.

Based on the postage costs alone, the council said it achieved a cost benefit of £1,500 for every £1 spent.

Lewisham said several other councils had run similar schemes, and that it was encouraging other town halls to follow suit.

“It requires some collaborative teamwork and, of course, the extra workload across a number of services. But the results speak for themselves”.

As part of its wider school food strategy, Wandsworth found 67 children who were eligible for but not claiming meals.

Schools will get an extra £84,000 a year in pupil premium funding as a result. Pupils also get an extra £8,040 of summer food vouchers and £8,500 of help with uniforms.

Wandsworth said the process was “lengthy and involves a number of teams”, but was an “incredibly worthwhile piece of work”.

The council will now promote the approach to London and national administrations and recommended government set an “ambitious timeline and process for the introduction of a new national auto-enrolment system by 2025”.

Ministers should also work to agree how benefits data could be accessed and used by councils for opt-out mechanisms, and commission an “open-plate” FSM registration rates dataset so that a current assessment of under registration rates can be reviewed”.



Freddie Ghoshal

# FSM auto-enrolment learnings

- Went above and beyond to deliver pilot for October Census 2023 – wish we had more time!
- Engage with stakeholders early!
- Data linking challenges
  - Data stored in silos, many separate databases (internal & external)
  - Regular challenge to bring multiple data sets together, no single person identifier
  - However, UPRNs widely used for address data matching
  - Open-source tools for data linking (Splink)
- Take advantage of Auto-enrolment Toolkit (FixOurFood and Bremner&Co)
- Talk to us, happy to help!

# FSM auto-enrolment next steps

- Handover to CYP team, incorporate as BAU
- Do auto-enrolment activity twice a year
- Apply processes defined in an FSM auto-enrolment blueprint
- Working with GLA on a pan-London approach to auto-enrolment
- Part of a London pilot group to share data with several neighbouring Boroughs
- Taking part in FixOurFood research
- Sharing our journey and best practices with Councils across UK



**Thank you!**

**Mia Polovina, Data Science & Insight Lead**  
**[mia.polovina@lewisham.gov.uk](mailto:mia.polovina@lewisham.gov.uk)**

# Poll:

What is the biggest barrier to auto enrolment to FSM?

- Data governance
- Internal resource
- Access to data
- Confidence with data matching
- Lack of awareness of FSM auto enrolment





# Abigail Everett

## Policy in Practice



# A data driven solution to societal change

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## **Situation:**

- Millions of pounds of Free School Meals go unclaimed across the UK every year
- Universal primary free school meals in London

## **Problem:**

- Children from households on benefits are six times more likely to be in food poverty than those not on benefits
- A lack of incentive/awareness for local families to claim pupil premium that schools are missing out on
- High administrative burden and complexity leads to a low take up rate

## **Solution:**

- An innovative, data driven approach to identify eligible families can help to boost take up and deliver benefits to residents and schools
- LIFT can support with administrative savings for local authorities and for residents

## **Impact:**

- 3 data lead campaigns in London helped to deliver £720,000 in Free School Meals to families and £2 million in annual Pupil Premium for schools
- £800 cost to Lewisham's campaign



Large number of households

Complex policies

Hard to identify who is eligible  
and how to support them

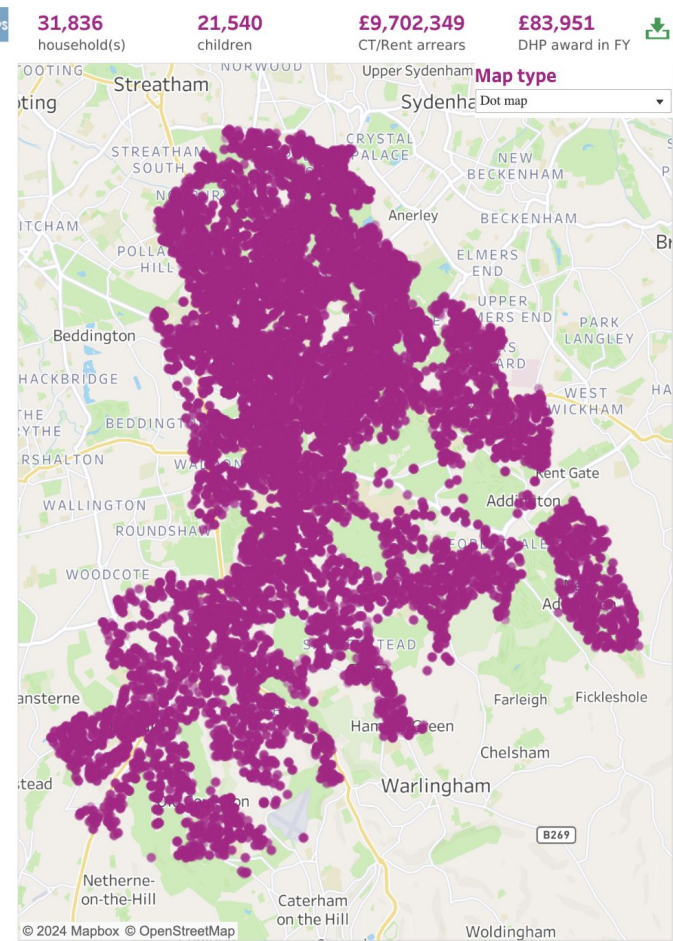
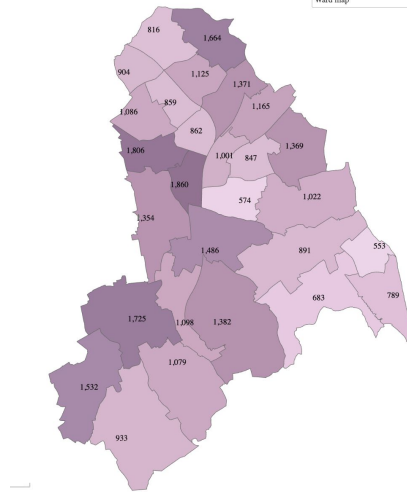
WELFARE REFORM BENEFITS TAKE-UP COVID-19 GROUPS

31,836 household(s) 21,540 children £9,702,349 CT/Rent arrears £83,951 DHP award in FY

OTHER BENEFITS - TAKE UP

|                                         |                                         |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Free school meals (FSM)                 | NHS prescriptions                       |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No  |
| Free food vouchers                      | Eligible free childcare                 |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No  |
| Warm Homes Discount                     | Water sure                              |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No  |
| Free TV license                         | Disabled bus pass                       |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No  |

Map type  
Ward map



Directly filter down to those eligible

Identify who is eligible and not claiming

Target and tailor support to households

Track outcomes

+ WELFARE REFORM X BENEFITS TAKE-UP + COVID-19 GROUPS

household(s) 3,463  
children 6,286  
CT/Rent arrears £1,906,134  
DHP award in FY £5,250

Free school meals (FSM)  
☒ Yes  
☐ No

NHS prescriptions  
☒ Yes  
☐ No

Free food vouchers  
☒ Yes  
☒ No

Eligible free childcare  
☒ Yes  
☒ No

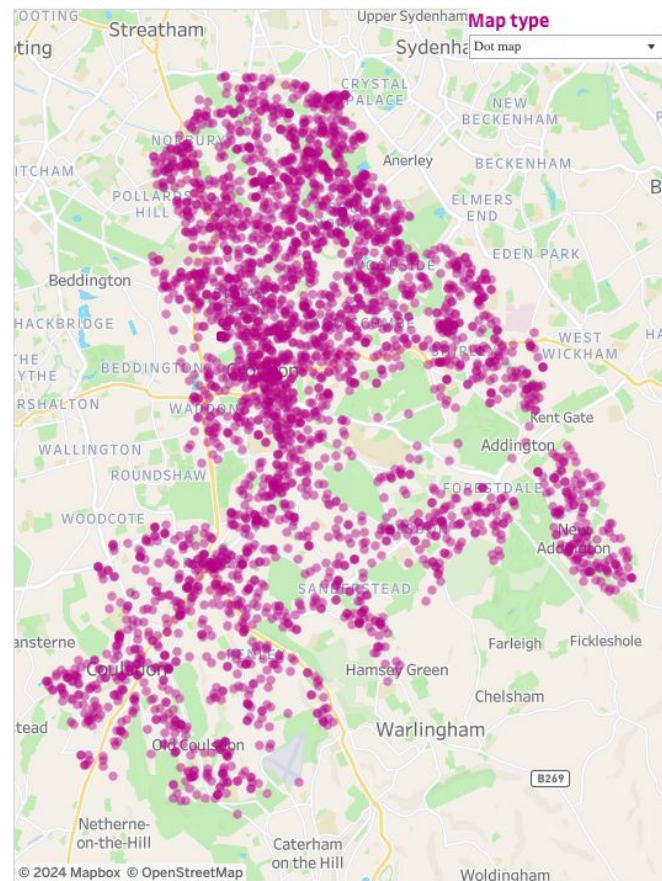
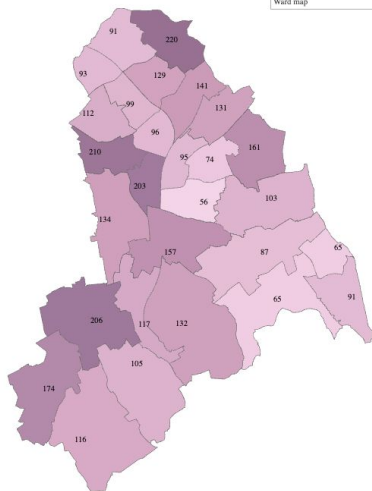
Warm Homes Discount  
☒ Yes  
☒ No

Water sure  
☒ Yes  
☒ No

Free TV license  
☒ Yes  
☒ No

Disabled bus pass  
☒ Yes  
☒ No

Map type  
Word map



# Tracking outcomes

- School census data
- But we know the impact of claiming benefits goes further

## OUTCOME TRACKER

View the impact of a specific outreach or campaign and how its affected outcomes for your residents.

Explore the movement in and out of a specific outcome and other changes in events during that period . Click + icons to drilldown to the household journey screen.

1. Start date...



2. End date...



3. Paste HB list for campaign group (Optional)

### Household numbers

**2,061** total  
households

**1,845** of which have  
data at selected start  
and end dates

### Main changes between Jul 2021 and Jan 2022

#### CORE OUTCOME (REDUCTION IN)

|                            |        |     |        |
|----------------------------|--------|-----|--------|
| Arrears of £250+           | 28% to | 8%  | ▼ -20% |
| Cash shortfall             | 4% to  | 2%  | ▼ -2%  |
| Unemployment (working age) | 7% to  | 4%  | ▼ -3%  |
| Temporary accommodation    | 14% to | 15% | ▲ +2%  |

Only include households who are in the data at both the start and end date?

Yes - Only show households in both ti... ▼

#### INCOME AVERAGES

|                    |           |        |         |
|--------------------|-----------|--------|---------|
| Income after costs | £1,025 to | £985   | ▼ -£39  |
| Take home income   | £2,800 to | £2,705 | ▼ -£96  |
| Earned income      | £938 to   | £987   | ▲ +£49  |
| Benefits income    | £1,682 to | £1,578 | ▼ -£105 |

#### DEBT AVERAGES

|              |         |     |         |
|--------------|---------|-----|---------|
| Arrears      | £238 to | £79 | ▼ -£159 |
| Rent arrears | £31 to  | £22 | ▼ -£9   |
| CT arrears   | £206 to | £57 | ▼ -£150 |



# Practical steps to start this process

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1. Engage with relevant stakeholders
2. Start the data governance process
3. Identify the legal gateways that cover the work you are doing
4. Identify eligible households
5. Data matching
6. Set up the process to reach out to eligible but not claiming households
7. Register pupils



# Discussion



# Next steps

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Take our very short survey when the webinar ends to:

- Give us feedback and ask further questions of our speakers
- Book a chat with the team



Scan to book a chat

Register for our next webinars:

- Missing out: Over £1 billion in support is unclaimed in North East England each year on Wednesday 10 July
- Housing and innovation: New ways to tackle the cost of living crisis and rent arrears challenges on Wednesday 24 July





# Thank you

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Mia Polovina, Lewisham Council  
Rachael Walker, Policy in Practice  
Abigail Everett, Policy in Practice

hello@policyinpractice.co.uk  
0330 088 9242

