

## Three London boroughs tackle child hunger by auto enrolment of 1,500 students in Free School Meals

### Low awareness, administrative complexity and procrastination leaves nearly £231 million in Free School Meals unclaimed in the UK

Over 470,000 children across the UK are missing out on Free School Meals (FSM) worth £231 million. Yet, children from households on benefits were six times more likely to be in food poverty than those not on benefits.

Free School Meals exists to ensure that no child from a low income household goes hungry. For households claiming certain benefits, FSM gives children access to nutritious meals during term time and school holidays. It is also a gateway benefit for other discretionary support. This can include FSM holiday support, Holiday Activity and Food programme and uniform support grants.

Yet millions in FSM go unclaimed every year because of lack of awareness, administrative complexity and time based 'I'll do it later' behaviours means that many eligible families miss out on this support.

Low take up of FSM is unnecessary and harmful. Children who receive FSM have reduced absences and improved concentration.

#### Free School Meals auto enrolment campaigns Income generated for families and schools using LIFT

For every £1 invested, £800 secured for families, £2,200 secured for schools

Lambeth	Lewisham	Wandsworth
£265,800 gained for families	£391,000 gained for families	£64,000 gained for families
£722,000 pupil premium for schools	£1,100,000 pupil premium for schools	£142,000 pupil premium for schools

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LIFT helped Lambeth, Lewisham, and Wandsworth Councils to secure £3.3 million to families and schools from Free School Meal auto enrolment campaigns

### LIFT case study

#### At a glance

For every £1 invested, £800 was secured for residents and £2,200 was secured for schools

1,500 students auto enrolled into Free School Meals

£720,000 in Free School Meals to families

£1.9 million in annual Pupil Premium for schools

3 data led campaigns

1 LIFT platform

For each pupil in receipt of FSM, the Pupil Premium in 2023 was worth £1,455 to primary schools and £1,035 to secondary schools. But a major flaw in the system is that an award of Pupil Premium can only be made to the school once a parent applies for FSM.

Lambeth, Wandsworth and Lewisham councils have made it their mission to tackle child hunger, and low FSM and Pupil Premium take up. But without the right tools this was set to be a difficult task.

Given that many eligible families were unaware of their entitlement to FSM, councils needed a way to dynamically use their data to visualise hidden pockets of need and eligibility. Councils would then engage with families to inform them of their entitlement and help them overcome barriers to take it up.

### **Solution: LIFT platform identifies over 1,500 children for auto opt in FSM campaign**

Policy in Practice's Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT) platform combines datasets, together with a built in expert policy engine to paint a clearer picture of residents' benefit entitlements and debts. It identifies households that are eligible for FSM by flagging families who:

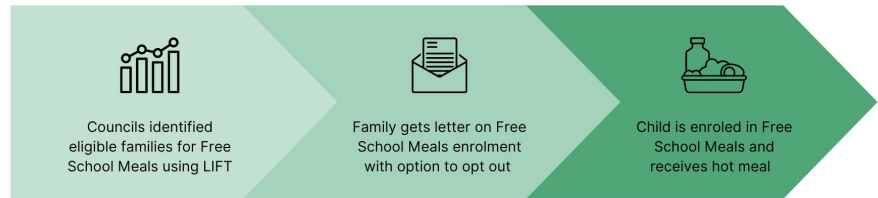
- Have a net earned income below £7,400 if on Universal Credit
- Receive a passported benefit
- Have school aged children in full time education

LIFT data is then cross referenced with School Census data to identify which households are eligible but not currently claiming FSM. This process identified over 900 households, with around 1,500 children. Across the boroughs, we identified:

- 580 children in Lambeth
- 850 children in Lewisham
- 114 children in Wandsworth

To overcome household barriers to take up, the councils sought to reduce the hassle associated with applying to FSM. Usually, parents must apply for FSM themselves or via their school.

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LIFT enables councils to identify and auto enrol 1,500 student in Free School Meals

"Our commitment to maximising Free School Meals enrolment not only ensures fairer access to essential nourishment for children in Lambeth's schools but also directly channels vital additional funding into our schools"

**Clr Ben Kind**  
**Councillor & Cabinet**  
**Member for Children &**  
**Families**  
**Lambeth Council**

With LIFT and census data in hand, councils could be certain of a family's FSM eligibility. They could then use this information to enrol a child in FSM. This takes the pressure off families to fill in an application. It also picks up those households who may not have been aware of the support available.

Households then receive a letter letting them know that they will be enrolled into FSM unless they choose to opt out.

By licensing LIFT, Lambeth, Wandsworth, and Lewisham have been able to adopt this approach to identify and engage with eligible households quickly and accurately. Moving forward, they will be continuing these campaigns each year, to ensure all students are getting a hot meal during the school day.

**Impact: Auto enrolment campaigns generates over £800 to families and £2,200 to schools for every £1 spent**

Collectively, Lambeth, Wandsworth and Lewisham councils have given 1,500 students Free School Meals worth £460 each per year, generating over £2.7 million to residents and schools in the process.

**Campaign 1: Lambeth FSM campaign saves over £265,800 for 580 children and £722,000 for schools**

580 children were auto enrolled onto FSM after receiving a letter from Lambeth Council. The total household savings was over £265,800. £722,000 in annual Pupil Premium funding was generated for schools.

A core finding for Lambeth from this approach has been how data helped to identify groups disproportionately represented among those on the lowest incomes.

79% of the children auto enrolled onto FSM were from Black, Asian or Multi Ethnic backgrounds (66% of Lambeth's school children are from these family backgrounds)

### **Campaign 2: Lewisham's FSM campaign saves over £391,000 for 850 children and £1.1 million for schools**

850 children were auto enrolled onto FSM after receiving a letter from Lewisham Council. The total household savings was over £391,000.

£1.1 million in annual Pupil Premium funding was generated for schools.

### **Campaign 3: Wandsworth's FSM campaign saves £64,000 for 114 children and £142,000 for schools**

114 children were auto enrolled onto FSM after receiving a letter from Wandsworth Council. Pupils also received a total of £8,040 of summer food vouchers and £3,500 towards uniform costs. The combined total household savings was over £64,000.

Schools will receive an additional £142,000 in Pupil Premium funding, taking the total value of the campaign to over £200,000.

At around £1 per letter to 900 families across the three boroughs, this project returned over £800 to families and £2,200 to schools for every £1 spent.

This scheme shows that removing parent application to FSM via auto enrolment can have hugely positive impacts on both households and schools. With so many families having to choose between heating or eating because of the increased cost of living, FSM auto enrolment campaigns are crucial to ensure that no student goes hungry.

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