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From eligibility to enrolment: How local authorities increase Free School Meals take-up and support schools

Wednesday 14 October 2026

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Housekeeping

- New webinar platform: RingCentral Events
- Short survey
- Aim to finish by 11.30
- Ask your questions throughout in the panel on the right
- Slides and recording will follow
- Connect with us on **LinkedIn** or **register for our newsletter**

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We empower organisations to **reduce financial vulnerability** and **safeguarding risk**





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Our research shows
£24 billion of support
is unclaimed every year



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Today's speakers and panelists



Miles Hession,
Senior Policy and Data Analyst,
Policy in Practice



Matthew Evans,
Head of Service
Revenues & Benefits,
Wrexham County Borough Council



Peter Gasparelli,
Head of Performance & Insight,
Cognus



Abbie Everett,
Head of Client Services,
Policy in Practice

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Agenda

- **Housekeeping remarks**
- **Free School Meals policy and changes**

  Miles Hession, Senior Policy and Data Analyst, Policy in Practice
- **Data matching and auto enrolment to increase FSM take-up in Wrexham**

  Matthew Evans, Head of Service Revenues & Benefits, Wrexham County Borough Council
- **FSM & Auto-Enrolment – Sutton's Story**

  Peter Gasparelli, Head of Performance & Insight, Cognus
- **Running successful Free School Meals take up campaigns**

  Abbie Everett, Head of Client Services, Policy in Practice
- **Q&A**

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Miles Hession

Senior Policy and Data Analyst,
Policy in Practice

Free School Meals policy and changes

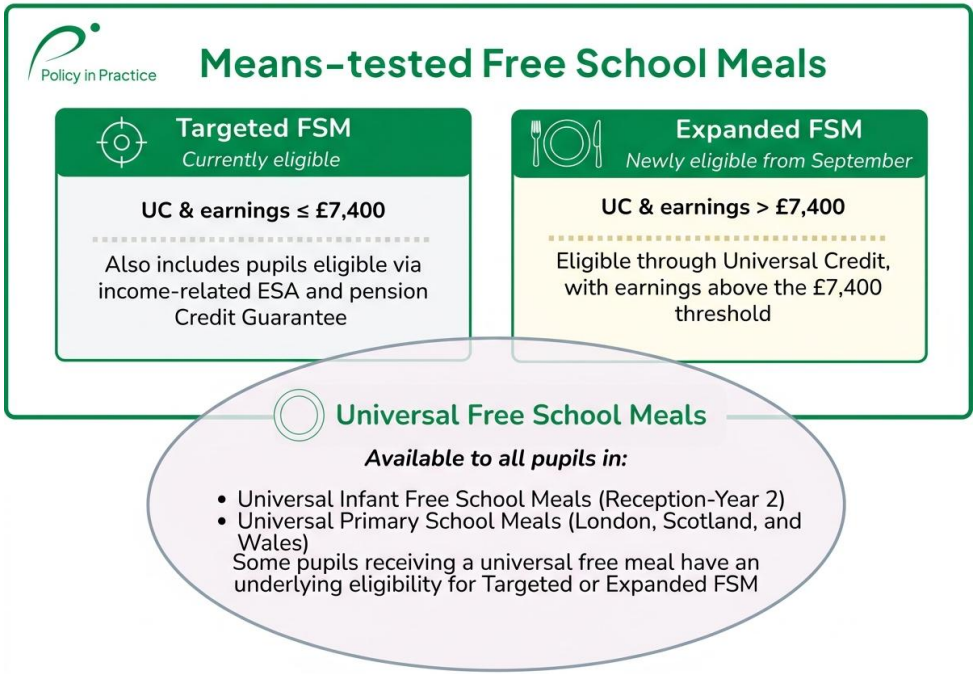


Free School Meals Policy: Pre-September

- Free School Meals has been a crucial lifeline for many students
- Receipt of Free School Meals also unlocks:
  - Pupil Premium (England) / Pupil Development Grant (Wales) / Pupil Equity Funding (Scotland)
  - Additional Family Funding (School Essentials Grant, holiday vouchers, club places)
  - Additional funding through National Funding Formula
  - **Requires an application**
- National criteria for eligibility: qualifying benefit + income threshold
- Universal programs
- Transitional protection, “Ever6”

Free School Meals Policy: Now

- The Expanded Cohort
  - All UC households in England, some in Wales
- Expanded group is meals only
  - “Targeted” is the old means-tested criteria
- Transitional protections have ended
- Annual rechecks for meals
  - Ever6 still used for additional school funding



Proactive outreach and data matching

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- Data matching is still important in finding likely eligible students
    - Ability to distinguish between targeted and expanded
- More universal provisions = more outreach needed
    - Underlying eligibility, additional funds for the school unlocked
    - Auto-enrolment is really useful for reaching these students
- Embedding auto-enrolment in annual recheck processes

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CYNGOR BWRDEISTREF SIROL
wrecsam



Matthew Evans

Head of Service Revenues & Benefits,
Wrexham County Borough Council

Data matching and auto enrolment to increase FSM take-up in Wrexham

Wrexham Background

- CTR & FSM administered in Benefits Team
- Whilst CTR automated – large hit rate of around 70% on UC automation
- FSM administered in Synergy System (Education Based)
- Full access to both systems
- Regular discussion with MIS team in education & look at maximising FSM take-up
- SEG – Delivered in Education Finance
- Currently 3,789 live FSM cases

Data Matching – Background

- Have done some basic matching in the past – low level between FSM eligible and CTR data
- Recognise that both cohorts are unique – NRPF cases would not be in CTR
- Have understanding of SHBE & CTR files and recognise some of data needed for this purpose
- Data re-use request completed and signed off by DPO, completed DPIA and explained rationale

Data Matching – DWP

- Re-use request sent to DWP
- Re-use request written using both LIFT Rationale but also expanded further to include use of Local Welfare Provision File
- Re-use Future proof and will be doing further work on LWP which will expand upon later

Education Data Needed

- Full file of all children – not just those entitled to FSM
- Ultimately want to find out about those not eligible but also those who are not eligible and are on Transitional Protection
- Children data in education system is vast so this needs to be filtered

Data Matched and Returned to LA.. Next Steps

- 165 Cases Returned
- Split (initial numbers)
- 29 Primary
- 124 Mixed
- 6 Secondary
- 16 Sixth Form (did not check these)

Returned Data – Next Steps

- Recognise there a lag in data – in reality several weeks out of date
- Also need to recognise that things may have changed (UC/Earnings etc – When was the last data interest)
- Data needs further checks – Establish whether recently applied in which case no further action
- Does customer still meet eligibility Criteria – ECS check
- Check education data – is child in school

Data Reviewed and Numbers Reduced

- From initial data reviewed
- 29 Primary – Established 19 eligible
- 124 Mixed – Established 82 eligible
- 6 Secondary – Established 3 eligible
- Main reason for differences

Contacting Parents

- All completed via email
- Able to establish contact details for parents from UC data (Benefits) or Education system (admissions)
- Email sent to parents advising that we have identified child(ren) as eligible for Free School Meals and propose to award unless hear to contrary in next 7 days
- Directed them to SEG Application to provide bank details

Impact of Emails

- No phone calls, 5 customers who we identified that we would auto award then applied
- 25 Cases have applied for School Essential Grant
- As we were able to accurately target cases which would have taken around 7 hours to filter and match data

Local Welfare Provision File / Expanded FSM

- Phase 2 of this work
- LWP File needs some mining but good source of UC families not on CTR – doesn't have ages of children but possible to match
- Can filter data to establish cases which have earnings below FSM threshold, has postcode & NINO but no address
- This could be source for CTR take-up also, will need to plan and track

Conclusions

- Based on Data Matching increased take-up by 104 Cases equivalent to 3% of actual live cases
- Most of cases which awarded were primary school cases where multiple children e.g. previous application for 2 children and new child started in reception/year 1 – not applied for FSM – likely due to UFSM
- Ideally schools should identify this (although this only applies where in same school)

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Sutton

Peter Gasparelli

Head of Performance & Insight, Cognus

FSM & Auto-Enrolment – Sutton's Story

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Why auto-enrolment?

The problems:

- KS1 UFSM (KS2 as well in London)
- Parental understanding of additional benefits
- Stigma
- Inconsistent school practice and knowledge
- Local Revenues & Benefits data issues
- New starters and October census timing

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Initial approach

- Run alongside application process
- Free School Meals Auto-enrolment Toolkit and Resources - FixOurFood
- Data Protection Impact Assessment
- Census data matching (LIFT data – Policy in Practice)
- Validate current school and status
- Opt-out
- Check eligibility
- Inform & record

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Outcomes

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
August 2025	January 2026	August 2026	October 2026
May census match	October census match	All benefits data	Monthly benefits data
185 children	86 children	284 children (55 Targeted FSM)	TBC
Rechecks - 75 children		Rechecks - 100 children (70 Targeted FSM)	
£490k Pupil Premium (Year 1)		£175k Pupil Premium (Year 1)	
730 children (308 current Targeted FSM)			

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Business as usual

- DfE Attendance data reports
- Monthly LIFT data report
- Filter benefits start dates since last report
- Match to pupil attendance record
- Check any existing FSM status
- Opt-out email / letter
- Eligibility check
- Notify parent & school
- Recheck all not eligible / expanded FSM
- Notify parent / school
- Application process (targeting out-borough residents)
- London cross-border auto-enrolment (current pilot)

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Why auto-enrolment?

“Thank you for your help and support with this, one parent was incredibly grateful to be contacted, saying she felt too embarrassed to ask. This will hopefully ensure families who are most in need receive the support they often desperately need”

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Poll

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Where is your local authority currently at on its Free School Meals take-up journey?

- Relying primarily on traditional parent applications (standard opt-in)
- Running proactive targeted communications to encourage applications (targeted opt-in)
- Interested in auto-enrolment, but not sure where to start
- Already planning or running an auto-enrolment scheme
- Not sure / Representing a non-LA partner

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Abbie Everett

Head of Client Services,
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Running successful Free School Meals take up campaigns

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Approaches differ across local authorities

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Traditional Methods (Opt in)

To get started:

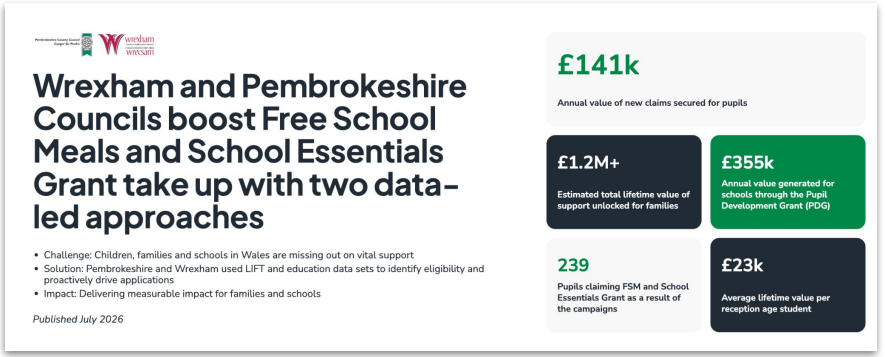
- Information Governance
- School Census (PLASC) match
- Communications to eligible households to encourage applications

Pembrokeshire's successes:

- **135 successful claims** for FSM & School Essentials Grant **(+270% YoY)**
- **£70,575** annual value for pupils & families
- **£155,250** in Pupil Development Grant for schools

Take away:

Continues to deliver successful campaigns while potentially working towards auto enrolment



Approaches differ across local authorities

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Auto-Enrolment (Opt out)

To get started:

- Information Governance
- School Census (or PLASC) match
- Communications to eligible households informing them they will be automatically enrolled by a set date unless they opt out

District & county councils:

(Data is held in different places)

- District council holds the benefits data
- County council holds the school census data
- Data sharing proven to be possible



"We're proud to be one of the first two-tier councils in the country to launch a campaign like this. Free school meals provide vital support to families in South Cambridgeshire, and to secure these for 81 children because of this campaign is a resounding success. Their schools will be over £1 million better off thanks to the additional funding secured because of these claims."

Cllr Henry Batchelor, Lead Cabinet Member for Communities
South Cambridgeshire District Council

Free School Meals campaign results:

- 388 additional pupils receiving Free School Meals
- £531,666 in additional funding for schools through the Pupil Premium
- Around £194,000 in direct savings for families
- £4,168,317 in estimated lifetime value of support

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Eligibility differs across the country

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Regional Policy Filters

Filters on LIFT are regularly updated to reflect changing policy across Scotland, England, and Wales. Regional differences in universal Free School Meals can also be accounted for.

Means-tested Free School Meals (FSM) Scotland

- ☐ Eligible
- ☐ Not Eligible

Means-tested Free School Meals (FSM) England

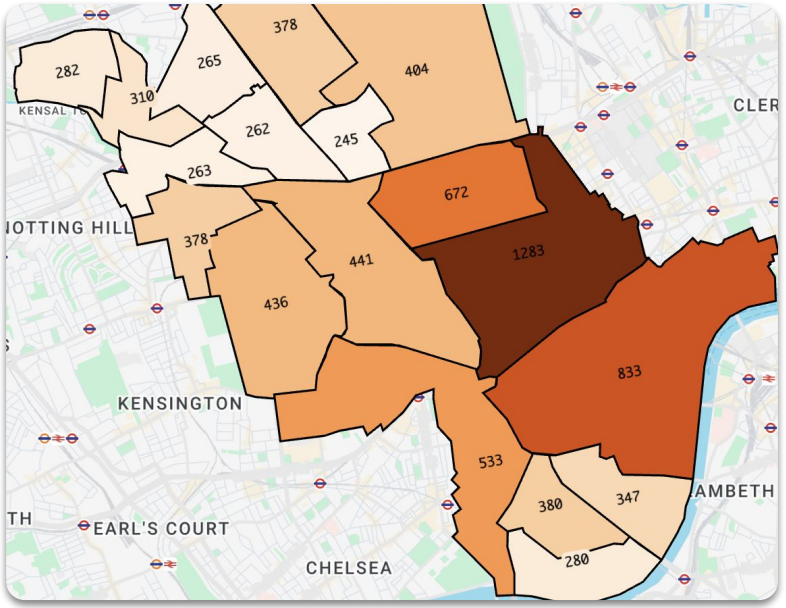
- ☐ Targeted
- ☐ Expanded
- ☐ Not Eligible

Means-tested Free School Meals (FSM) Wales

- ☐ Targeted
- ☐ Expanded
- ☐ Not Eligible

Geographic Granularity & Mapping

Ward level view for County Councils; household level view for districts and unitary councils.



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Discussion and Q&A

What's next

If you would like to collaborate or ask more questions, feel free to book a chat with us using this QR code or this **link**



Join us for our next webinar on 18 November: "**The Autumn Budget: what it means for councils and the residents they support**"

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Thank you to our speakers

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