



A Hunger Trap? Eligibility criteria for free school meals in England

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Summary

- In England, an estimated 800,000 children living in poverty do not qualify for income-related free school meals.
- It is families who work for their poverty – and whose earnings as factory workers, police officers, teaching assistants, or postal workers, for example, place them just outside the eligibility criteria – who suffer most under the current policy. Despite living in poverty, each of those families loses out on hundreds of pounds' worth of additional support during term time and the holidays (with places on the Holiday Activities and Food programme often linked to free school meal entitlement), with some having to use food banks as a result.
- If the Government is to ease the pressure on working families who are struggling with the rising cost of living, it must immediately reform the eligibility criteria to ensure no child living in poverty is also going hungry.
- Alongside that reform, the introduction of an automatic registration scheme would ensure that every child in need of support receives it, while saving schools, councils, and families countless hours and resources having to deal with bureaucratic application systems.
- This document is being published to coincide with a parliamentary debate on eligibility for free school meals in England, secured on our behalf by Emma Lewell-Buck MP.

Reports from the frontline of the Feeding Britain network

Warrington

'We are starting to see children, who narrowly miss the criteria, sharing lunches with other children (as they haven't been able to bring their own food in), not eating, or resorting to eating 'rubbish' food.'

Barnsley

'I have a parent who is struggling like mad. She is a single parent with a gorgeous little girl. She works 40 hrs per week in a [...] care home on minimum wage and cannot claim free dinners because she is pennies over the threshold. She gets a little help from tax credits but not much. She is proper struggling and she's one of the [...] loveliest people I've ever met. She even has to pay for a taxi each morning because she doesn't drive and no buses could get her there on time.'

'We have several families who are just above the line, all on low income. They are less than £10 above the threshold which has excluded them from FSM and school trips which are paid for if the children are on FSM.'

'We have a child who attends our holiday club and has done so since the first one. She is in a nuclear family of four, Mum, Dad, and two children. Her Dad lost his job a while back [and] since then – almost a year now – the mother has been the main bread winner. She works at [a coffee shop] earning approximately £11k per year and gets universal credit. If she was working less and getting under the threshold of £7k she could get free holiday clubs and school meals. As it is, she is in debt for school meals, and often has to rely on food banks (which she says are often out of date) and has to choose between food and bills. Her family help with her mortgage otherwise they would be homeless.'

'Single Mum, one teenager, one child aged 8, work's term time only in a school as a TA. She received some UC but is not eligible for FSM. During school term time she just about keeps her head above water, but particularly with the cost of living crisis she is starting to struggle to balance the budget.'

'The eligibility criteria also causes massive issues when engaging with the children (eligible and not), particularly senior aged, as they do not want to attend holiday clubs which their friends can't also go to. This results in lower attendance at the clubs when these places could have been filled easily with a healthy mixture of eligible and non-eligible children.'

Leicester

‘One of the parents [has a husband working in the local factory], he doesn’t have fixed hours of working. The family is on Universal Credit. She has two children. They are not eligible for free school meals as their income is just above the criteria.’

‘We have many families who complain that they are just above the criteria, they get Universal Credit but their children are not on free school meals and not eligible for the HAF programme. We provide 75 places for the FSM children and we charge £5 for others who are not on FSM. We get many families who are not able to afford £5 per day. These families come to our food bank instead. It’s very hard to turn them down. All these families who come to our food bank, miss the eligibility criteria by very little.’

‘The group identified as being just outside eligibility for free school meals [...] are less likely to know their way round the benefits system, and [...] admitting to having hungry children is the last thing lots of parents want to do. [...] From our conversations with parents, the high costs of private renting are the biggest contributory factor to their relative poverty, despite a possible two parents in a household working.’

Norfolk

‘Families that are narrowly missing out on free school meals eligibility (and therefore things like free places in HAF) are struggling financially and therefore with their mental health. Within the shop membership I have many families who have one of the two parents working, or both working part time who very narrowly miss the criteria. One particular family, [one of whose children has] complex physical and mental disabilities, just miss out on free school meals [and] rarely make it through to the end of the month without resorting to borrowing with no clear way of how and when they can repay. They take pride in the fact that they work but have recently realised that they would be no worse off if they didn’t work – in fact they would then qualify for extra help so in reality would be better off.’

‘Another family come in asking regularly for referral to a food bank or a crisis food pack from us. [They] have said without the free meal offering we have fortnightly and other similar projects nearby, they don’t know how the kids would get regular hot meals. Dad works as a police officer, Mum stays home as [the] youngest children have extra needs, though she is looking now for a part time job in school hours.’

Nottinghamshire

‘Dad walked out of the family home, he had a breakdown and didn’t want to be with his wife and children. He had been furloughed from work. Mum had to start working all the hours she could as a post lady. She was earning £22,000 but suddenly taking on the mortgage and all the household bills. Her 16 year old daughter was coming to college hungry and afraid to ask Mum for money for lunch as Mum was working all the hours she could and running herself into the ground. Student was not eligible for free meals due to Mum’s income being above the UC threshold.’

Cornwall

‘A large percentage of requests for help are for working families whose income does not cover basic outgoings, many of the requests for help are from parents who are having to use food money to put petrol in their cars to get to work and then going without themselves. The crisis is escalating at the moment as working parents are also looking for free childcare as they are unable to take the time off to care for them in the school holidays or to pay to provide childcare. This is resulting in people having to leave children with insufficient supervision and care or to leave their jobs during the summer months.’