



A new frontier in welfare reform: maximising registration for Free School Meals and Healthy Start through a single application process



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- In England alone, hundreds of thousands of children and young people living in poverty are not registered for programmes, such as Free School Meals and Healthy Start, which comprise an essential, nutritional safety net for families on low incomes. An estimated 215,000 eligible beneficiaries¹ are not registered for the former, while NHS data from October 2023 show that 141,970 eligible beneficiaries are not registered for the latter.
- With a part of Pupil Premium funding linked to registration rates for Free School Meals, one of the authors used COLLECT data to calculate and share with Schools North East that, in the North East alone, the combined cost to families and schools of under-registration in 2021-22 exceeded £23 million.
- In previous years, Feeding Britain has proposed legislative solutions which would automatically register all eligible children and young people for each successive programme, by shifting the registration process from 'opt in' to 'opt out'. These were the Free School Meals (Automatic Registration of Eligible Children) Bill, presented by The Rt Hon Frank Field MP in 2015, and the Healthy Start Scheme (Take-Up) Bill, presented by both Kate Green MP and Emma Lewell-Buck MP in 2021 and 2022 respectively. The closure of the parliamentary session in each case meant that neither bill was able to make it into law.
- Feeding Britain has also proposed legislative amendments which would give effect to this policy, in respect of Free School Meals. They were to the Digital Economy Bill and the Schools Bill in 2016 and 2022 respectively.
- Following a House of Lords debate on the latter amendment, tabled by Baroness Boycott, the Department for Education permitted Feeding Britain to pilot the first moves toward automatic registration, in accordance with existing legislation, with a working group of more than 20 local authorities. In practice, this entails application forms for locally administered benefits, and other points of contact between local authorities and potentially eligible families, being reformed so as to gain from those families a request and/or agreement for their data to be used for this purpose.
- While this pilot exercise is anticipated to deliver an increase in registration rates for Free School Meals, we envisage additional reforms being required to maximise those rates fully – especially if our focus extends beyond Free School Meals to include Healthy Start.
- Our central recommendation, therefore, is the reform of Universal Credit into a single application process through which families, when submitting their data to the Department for Work and Pensions, can tick a box to request their data are used to register them simultaneously for these programmes (if eligible). This aligns with recommendations made by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, for 'proactive public policy', and the Bevan Foundation, for a 'single application form' in accordance with the Welsh Government's aims to simplify benefit application processes. The Scottish Government has articulated similar aims.
- Given the packed legislative agenda that is likely to follow an upcoming UK general election, we propose that this equitable approach, of a single application process, currently being piloted at a local level, should be replicated at a national level, through Universal Credit, thereby maximising registration rates across England, without the need for new legislation. This would, as a bare minimum, ensure that families deemed eligible by the state to receive support from these programmes are in fact doing so.

¹ <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/free-school-meals-one-million-more-school-children-could-be-fed-if-sign-process-eased>