

Free School Meals Auto-enrolment Project

Frequently Asked Questions

Updated 9th July 2024

Introduction

- The Department for Education reports that 11% of families nationally who are entitled to claim Free School Meals (FSM) have not applied to receive FSM.
- Lots of families could be claiming free school meals (and saving approximately £450 per year), and also accessing free holiday activities and help with other expenses.
- Lots of schools are missing out on pupil premium funding to help their most disadvantaged pupils (£1,455 per primary pupil and £1,035 per secondary pupil per year).
- To help with this, many councils have been looking at implementing FSM auto-enrolment schemes.

Free School Meals Auto-Enrolment schemes

- Sheffield City Council first implemented FSM auto-enrolment (opt out) in 2016 which resulted in 1,483 new children being automatically enrolled, and £1,392,600 additional Pupil Premium funding for their local schools in that year alone.
- North Yorkshire Council has been working on developing a FSM auto-enrolment programme during 2023-2024. We are in touch with other councils who have already implemented this system, so we can learn about the best way to do things. But we always welcome comments, queries or feedback from schools too.
- This work is part of a broader initiative involving other local authorities nationally with support from The University of York and the FixOurFood programme.

What is aim of the Free School Meals Auto-Enrolment (opt out) project for North Yorkshire?

- The project aims to identify school children (aged 4-16 years) in North Yorkshire who are entitled to FSM but whose families have not applied, and automatically enrol them (unless they opt out).

What are the benefits of this project? Why are we doing it?

- To increase the uptake of free school lunches, helping more children to eat a nutritious meal.
- Reduce food insecurity and save families money – the value to families of school meals is around £450 per child per year.
- Enable more children on FSM to access the other benefits including free holiday activities and help with other expenses.

- Increase the Pupil Premium funding into schools – this is around £1,455 per primary school-aged child and £1,035 per secondary school-aged child.
- Remove the barriers that families often face when applying (e.g. around language, literacy, cultural or technical issues).

What is involved?

- The process involves using benefits data (e.g. housing benefit and council tax reduction) to identify families with children who are entitled to claim FSM but who have not applied.
- Families identified from the data analysis work will be informed (by letter) that their child/ren are potentially entitled to FSM and will be automatically enrolled unless they opt out.
- Families will be able to opt out by contacting our Free School Meals Business Support team – email FSMauto@northyorks.gov.uk or telephone 01609 533405.
- Families who opt out but remain eligible will be contacted again the following year (if FSM auto-enrolment is undertaken) to ask if they would like to opt out again.
- Families who do NOT opt out will be registered by North Yorkshire Council and will be informed by us that their child/ren are now registered and can have a FSM.
- Schools will be provided with a list of children that have been enrolled for FSM so they can ensure their catering team are aware.

How will it work?

- The auto-enrolment process will be an annual 'mop-up' exercise, in addition to the existing service where parents apply through our website.
- It is designed to identify those families whose children could be having free school meals, but for whatever reason have not applied. (National estimates suggest that around 11% of entitled families are not claiming FSM. This project is trying to identify those 11% and enrol them automatically).
- FSM auto-enrolment will NOT replace all the existing actions, communications and activity that occurs to help entitled families to apply and get registered for FSM.

Which schools will be involved?

- FSM auto-enrolment will be offered to ALL schools in North Yorkshire, including academy trusts. A small number of schools do not use the council's application service; we will work with these schools individually to promote the auto-enrolment process.
- We are focusing on families with children aged 4-16 years.

What is the timescale for the project?

- We are planning on doing our FSM auto-enrolment checks for North Yorkshire in July this year, allowing families to opt out in July/August. We then aim to clarify with schools in September which additional children have been auto-enrolled for FSM.
- The aim is to complete the exercise ahead of the October census so that schools can claim the pupil premium funding next year. We would be looking to repeat the process each year.

What will schools need to do?

- Schools will be asked to let their catering teams know about the FSM auto-enrolment process (unless they are NYC/NYES catering, who are already aware), and to liaise with them regarding FSM provision for pupils.

What is the cost to schools?

- Schools will be charged £10 per pupil identified in the FSM auto-enrolment process (which is the same as we charge currently for schools who buy-in to our FSM checking service). Schools will be invoiced for the processing of pupil information in March 2025.
- There is a small disparity between what schools are paid for each meal and what they receive to cover the costs. It amounts to around £0.70 per meal. If a child takes every free meal over the 38 academic weeks in the school year, it totals roughly £133 per year, far less than the amount received for the Pupil Premium. Current data shows that take-up of free school meals is around 80%, so it is likely that the difference will be less than £133. Additionally, it is mandatory that all pupils in Years 1 and 2 are offered free school meals; schools are therefore having to cover the meal cost disparity for all these pupils, without necessarily the benefit of a Pupil Premium. Schools will be able to use the Pupil Premium funding to cover any shortfall in costs.
- We do not envisage a large number of additional children being identified per school, and feedback from other councils suggested that FSM auto-enrolment does not have a big impact on catering provision for schools.

What about communications to schools and families?

- We do not envisage the need for any widespread general communication to families about FSM auto-enrolment as this may cause confusion and families may be less likely to apply themselves.
- The families who are identified during the FSM auto-enrolment process will be notified by letter.
- We are communicating with schools in various ways to keep them informed and answer any queries e.g. red bag updates, emails to schools, headteacher/finance and admin conference updates, Teams meetings with school staff.

Who are the main contacts for more information?

- Helen Ingle, Project Lead and Public Health Manager, North Yorkshire Council, helen.ingle@northyorks.gov.uk
- Dr Gill Kelly, Project Sponsor and Consultant in Public Health, North Yorkshire Council, gill.kelly@northyorks.gov.uk
- Sharron Cooney, Project Manager at North Yorkshire Council Sharron.cooney@northyorks.gov.uk or Ken Waller, Senior Project Manager at North Yorkshire Council ken.waller@northyorks.gov.uk