



DEBATE PACK

Number 0073, 24 May 2021

Support for children entitled to free school meals

Summary

A Westminster Hall debate on the 'Support for children entitled to free school meals' has been scheduled for Wednesday 26 May 2021 from 2.30pm. The debate has been initiated by Catherine West MP.

The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

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1. Background

1.1 Eligibility for free school meals

Parents in England do not have to pay for school lunches if they [receive any of the following](#):

- Income Support
- Income-based Jobseekers Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- the guaranteed element of State Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit (provided they are not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190)
- Working Tax Credit run-on – paid for 4 weeks after a person stops qualifying for Working Tax Credit
- Universal Credit – with household income of less than £7,400 a year (after tax and not including any benefits) from 1 April 2018, with transitional protections for previously existing claimants

During the coronavirus outbreak, eligibility for free school meals [has been extended](#) to include some groups of children who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF).

Since September 2014, free school meals have been provided for all children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2.

Free school meals may also be available to pre-school children and those in school sixth forms. Local authorities are responsible for providing free school lunches and applications must be made through the relevant local body.

Section 4 of the Library briefing [School meals and nutritional standards \(England\)](#) provides information on eligibility, including the 2018 changes relating to claimants receiving Universal Credit.

1.2 Holiday meals and activities

Concerns have been raised regularly about children who receive free school meals during term time but may not receive adequate meals during the holidays.

Since 2018, the Government has funded a series of regional pilots of holiday meal and activity schemes.

In November 2020, alongside wider support for families during the coronavirus pandemic, the Government announced that the Holiday Activities and Food programme would be expanded from its previous pilots to [cover the whole of England](#), during the Easter, summer and Christmas holidays in 2021.¹

Section 4.6 of the Library briefing [School meals and nutritional standards \(England\)](#) provides information on the development of these schemes.

1.3 Support during the pandemic

During the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly during periods of school closure, a variety of support has been provided to children who would normally receive benefit-based free school meals, commonly in the form of vouchers or food parcels. The provision of support during the school holidays has proved particularly controversial.

Section 5 of the Library briefing [School meals and nutritional standards \(England\)](#) provides information on the development of support and the concerns that have been raised during this period.

1.4 Impact of the pandemic on low-income families and children

In December 2020, the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and the Church of England released a report, [Poverty in the Pandemic](#), updating previous research published in summer 2020 which looked at the impact of the pandemic on low-income families. The report was based on 678 online survey responses received between May and the end of November 2020 from families identified as meeting the eligibility criteria for free school meals.

Key findings included:

- Overall, around three-quarters of the families responding to the survey said they were finding it “difficult” or “very difficult” to manage financially. This proportion had remained fairly constant throughout the survey period.
- In the three months to November 2020, nearly nine in 10 respondents had experienced a significant deterioration in their living standards compared with their situation before the pandemic – up from eight in 10 families who responded to the survey between May and July.
- A higher proportion of families who responded to the survey in the three months to November 2020 reported losing employment. Many said they had never been in this position before, having worked all or most of their working lives, and were struggling to cope on Universal Credit.
- Even among those who were not previously in paid work, or whose employment had not been disrupted, around three-quarters of families were finding it harder to manage financially, due to rising living costs, additional caring responsibilities, reduced child

¹ Department for Work and Pensions, [New winter package to provide further support for children and families](#), 8 November 2020

maintenance payments and problems accessing other financial support.

- As a result of the pandemic, nearly six in 10 families said they were struggling to cover the cost of three or more basic essentials, including food, utilities, rent, travel or child-related costs. Around half of all families said they had a new or worse debt problem.
- A high and rising proportion of low-income families had also experienced a mental or physical health problem as a result of the pandemic – up from 48% between May and July to 56% between September and November 2020. The open-ended survey responses included references to the effect on the wellbeing of children, as well as adults.
- An increasing proportion of families had become reliant on the social security system, as unemployment increased. This was exposing problems with the current system, including the five-week wait for the first payment in Universal Credit, inadequate benefit levels, and the effect of the benefit cap and two-child limit on families.

The report made a series of recommendations including retaining the £20-a-week uplift to Universal Credit and tax credits (see below) and extending it to 'legacy' benefits, increasing children's benefits, expanding eligibility for free school meals, and lifting both the two-child limit and benefit cap.

1.5 Support for families through the benefits system

Since eligibility for free school meals depends, for most families, on receipt of a qualifying social security benefit or tax credit, levels of support through the benefits system will be a major determinant of the living standards of families receiving free school meals. Some (but not all) families on free school meals will have benefited from the temporary £20-a-week 'uplift' in Universal Credit introduced in response to the coronavirus pandemic, but this has to be seen in the context of other benefits policies of governments since 2010, including the household benefit cap, the two-child limit, and the freeze in the rates of most working-age and child benefits for a four year period from 2016-17 to 2019-20. And the £20 uplift is due to be withdrawn in October 2020.² Many campaigning organisations argue that the uplift should be extended further or made permanent.³ Some also argue that the uplift should also be extended to claimants of benefits other than Universal Credit.

While the child poverty rate is expected to fall in 2020-21, forecasts by certain think tanks suggest rates are set to increase in subsequent years. The Resolution Foundation estimates that with the roll-out of the two-child limit and removal of the family element for families on benefits, one in three children (33.7%) children will be in relative poverty⁴ by the end of the Parliament, 730,000 more than in 2020-21. If the £20 uplift is made

² See [Budget 2021: Social security measures](#), Commons Library Insight, 9 March 2021

³ See Commons Library briefings CBP-8973, [Coronavirus: Withdrawing crisis social security measures](#), 30 April 2021; and CBP-8999, [Coronavirus: Universal Credit during the crisis](#), 15 January, 2021

⁴ Defined as living in a household with less than 60% of median income.

permanent, they still expect child poverty to grow slightly, to 31.4% by 2024-25.⁵

In its Budget submission published in January 2021, the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) argued that the Government should “use social security as an effective fiscal stimulus to help the economy recover from the pandemic.”⁶ In addition to recommending that the Government prioritise long-term productive employment over getting people back into any job quickly, invest in childcare (extended schools in particular) to help increase parents’ labour market opportunities, and extend free school meals to all families receiving Universal Credit or Working Tax Credit, CPAG recommended that it:

- Retain the £20-a-week uplift, which they estimate would prevent 300,000 children being pushed into poverty;
- Scrap the benefit cap and two-child limit – which it estimates would cost £1.4 billion and would pull 200,000 children out of poverty and 450,000 children out of deep poverty; and
- Increase Child Benefit by £10 a week to provide a small income boost to all families affected by Covid – which it estimates would reduce child poverty by 450,000.

Similar recommendations were made in a joint briefing issued by the Children’s Society and eight other charities and campaigning organisations on 1 October 2020, [Post-Covid Policy: child poverty, social security and housing](#). In addition to recommending immediate increases to benefits for children and removing the benefit cap and two-child limit, the briefing also set out a series of longer-term “asks” including a comprehensive review of the social security system, as part of a broader child poverty strategy. The review should, it argues, look at the adequacy of child and adult benefits, and review the current models of support for childcare costs and housing costs. The briefing also suggests that the review should consider the accessibility and dignity of the benefits system for families, including looking at the “No Recourse to Public Funds” rule, the support available for families to make and managed benefit claims, and the role of conditionality.

In its most recent annual report on poverty, [UK Poverty 2020/21](#), published on 14 January 2021, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) also called on the Government to strengthen the benefits system, at a minimum by making the £20-a-week UC and WTC uplift permanent, and by extending it to legacy benefits. JRF also argues for an increase the amount of low-cost housing available for families on low incomes and increased support for households with high housing costs. It calls, furthermore, for “further bold action to retrain workers and create good quality new jobs”, and for greater support for people in the lowest-paid jobs, or people working part-time, to move into higher pay and access sufficient and secure working hours.

⁵ Mike Brewer et al, [The Living Standards Outlook 2021](#), Resolution Foundation, 18 January 2021

⁶ CPAG, [2021 Budget Representation](#), January 2021

2. Parliamentary Material

2.1 Debates

[Free School Meals](#)

21 Oct 2020 | House of Commons | 682 cc1129-1177

[School Breakfast Bill 2019-21](#)

13 Oct 2020 | Ten minute rule bill | House of Commons | Bill 194 2019-21

2.2 Early Day Motions

[Free school meals and child poverty](#)

EDM 1383 (session 2019-21)

20 January 2021

Patricia Gibson

[Tackling child food insecurity](#)

EDM 972 (session 2019-21)

06 October 2020

Robert Halfon

2.3 Parliamentary Questions

[Further Education: Food](#)

26 Apr 2021 | 184515

Asked by: Rachael Maskell

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what additional funding he is allocating to further education colleges for students who experience food poverty; and if he will make an assessment of the potential merits of introducing free school meals for such students.

Answering member: Vicky Ford | Department: Department for Education (DfE)

The government recognises the benefits of providing a healthy meal to the most disadvantaged students and is committed to providing free meals to those that need them.

From September 2014, further education institutions have been required to make provision for free meals to eligible disadvantaged students. The institution can decide for themselves whether to offer a meal, or a voucher or credit to exchange for a meal on-site or off-site.

Further guidance can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/free-meals-in-further-education-funded-institutions-guide-for-the-2020-to-2021-academic-year>.

Additionally, the 16 to 19 Bursary Fund, introduced in 2011, provides financial support to help students overcome specific barriers to participation so they can remain in education. It can be used in conjunction with free meals in further education funding, to meet individual student needs.

Pupil Premium

26 Apr 2021 | 914737

Asked by: Feryal Clark

What assessment he has made of the financial effect on (a) students and (b) schools of the Government's decision to base pupil premium allocations for 2021-22 on the October 2020 school census.

Answering member: Nick Gibb | Department: DfE

Pupil premium rates will be maintained in 2021-22. We expect to increase pupil premium funding nationally to over £2.5 billion, and a typical school can expect an increase in their pupil premium funding. Data is not yet available on the impact of using the October 2020 census to determine eligibility. Basing pupil premium funding for 2021-22 on October 2020 census data, instead of using the January census, brings the pupil premium in line with how the rest of the core schools' budget is calculated and provides earlier clarity for schools on their allocations.

Pupil premium will continue to be based on "Ever6 FSM", whereby all pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) at the time of the October census, or at any point in the previous six years, will attract pupil premium funding. As a result, we expect a typical school to see an increase in pupil premium funding from 2020-21 to 2021-22 as more children have become eligible for FSM as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak. We will confirm pupil premium allocations for the financial year 2021-22 in June 2021.

Alongside the pupil premium, we also intend to change the date for the FSM6 factor in the schools national funding formula (NFF). Without a change in dates, the FSM6 factor in the 2022-23 NFF would be based on January 2020 census data. Using the October 2020 census data instead will shorten the FSM6 funding lag in the NFF by nine months, and increase the amount of funding allocated through the FSM6 factor in 2022-23, as FSM eligibility increased significantly between January and October last year.

In addition to pupil premium funding, on 24 February 2021 the Government also announced a further £700 million package on top of the £1 billion COVID-19 catch-up already provided. This package includes £302 million for a one-off recovery premium which will be allocated to schools based on the same methodology as the pupil premium. In this way, schools with more disadvantaged pupils will receive larger amounts. The recovery premium also includes a "floor" to ensure that no primary school will receive less than £2000 and no secondary school less than £6000.

Free School Meals: Voucher Schemes

20 Apr 2021 | 179559

Asked by: Mick Whitley

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether his Department made an assessment of the potential merits of incorporating the £15 voucher scheme for local shops and supermarkets into the Healthy Start voucher scheme prior to the recent re-opening of schools during the covid-19 outbreak.

Answering member: Vicky Ford | Department: DfE

During the period of school opening restrictions, schools continued to provide free school meal support to pupils eligible for benefits related free school meals and who were learning at home. Extra funding was provided to support schools to provide lunch parcels or meals to eligible children. Schools were free to decide the best approach for their free school meal pupils. They could provide lunch parcels, locally arranged vouchers for local shops or supermarkets, or they could use the national voucher scheme.

The Healthy Start scheme helps to encourage a healthy diet for pregnant women, babies and young children from low income households. Vouchers are available for pregnant women and mothers with young children that meet the eligibility criteria, with further information available here: <https://www.gov.uk/healthy-start/eligibility>. In contrast, free school meals are available for eligible school age children. Further information on this is available here: <https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals>.

At the time, Healthy Start vouchers could be used to purchase fruit, vegetables, milk and infant formula, in order to support a healthy diet, but not the full range of foods needed to provide a balanced meal for a child at lunch time.

A range of options were considered, including using the Department of Health and Social Care's Healthy Start vouchers. However, these are aimed at different eligibility groups and were not designed to offer the full range of foods necessary to support a healthy, nutritious meal to learn, concentrate and achieve.

Given the pace required to set up support for free school meal pupils learning at home, this would not be considered a feasible option for delivery.

Breakfast Clubs

06 Apr 2021 | HL14178

Asked by: Lord Watson of Invergowrie

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of (1) the value of school breakfast clubs, and (2) the impact of hunger on learning in the classroom; and what steps they intend to take in response.

Answering member: Baroness Berridge | Department: DfE

The department knows that breakfast clubs can bring a wide range of benefits for children. An evaluation by the Education Endowment Foundation found that supporting schools to run a free of charge, universal breakfast club before school delivered an average of 2 months additional progress for pupils in key stage 1 with moderate to low security. Breakfast club schools also saw an improvement in pupil behaviour and attendance.

We support around 1.4 million children through universal infant free school meals, and a further 1.4 million through the benefit related free school meals, providing nutritious meals for children.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, we have continued to support children learning at home while schools were largely closed, through the provision

of vouchers or lunch parcels. Our supplier, Edenred, have reported that more than £90 million vouchers have been redeemed by families for use in supermarkets during the most recent period of school closures.

The department is investing up to £38 million in the National School Breakfast Programme. This money is kick-starting or improving breakfast clubs in up to 2,450 schools in disadvantaged areas, making them sustainable in the long run. Approximately 280,000 children are supported by this scheme.

We are extending our support for breakfast clubs until 2023, to make sure thousands of children in disadvantaged areas have a healthy start to the day.

[Free School Meals: Coronavirus](#)

20 May 2020 | 47497

Asked by: Florence Eshalomi

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will take steps to ensure that free school breakfast and lunch provision continues during the (a) May half-term and (b) summer holidays during the covid-19 outbreak.

Answering member: Vicky Ford | Department: DfE

Ordinarily, provision for free school meals (FSM) is during term-time only. However, during the Easter holidays, the department met the costs of offering FSM to eligible pupils not attending school during term-time weeks. This was in recognition of the unprecedented levels of disruption and uncertainty for schools during this time.

These are rapidly developing circumstances. We will continue to keep the situation under review and will keep Parliament updated accordingly.

[Free School Meals](#)

13 Dec 2016 | 56826

Asked by: Frank Field

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps she is taking to ensure that housing benefit data is used by local authorities in England to identify and automatically register all children eligible for free school meals.

Answering member: Edward Timpson | Department: DfE

We want to make it as simple as possible for schools and local authorities to determine eligibility for free school meals (FSM).

We understand that some local authorities have found this approach can be an effective tactic. However, it does not provide a complete or sustainable solution to automatic registration for FSM. We do not consider further legislation to be necessary for this particular approach.

To support FSM registration, the department provides an online eligibility checking facility; and a model registration form for schools to use within their enrolment process.

The department is exploring what opportunities exist in the longer term to make FSM registration processes more efficient.

3. Press Articles

The following is a selection of news and media articles relevant to this debate.

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3.1 News Articles

[LGA survey: £118m for disadvantaged pupils could be lost from school budgets this year](#)

fe news

21 May 2021

[Government urged to expand free school meals and roll out 'healthy food vouchers' to fix 'broken' food system](#)

inews

5 May 2021

[Education spending on NI's disadvantaged pupils 'ineffective'](#)

BBC Northern Ireland

5 May 2021

[Free school meals for all children in Wales call](#)

BBC Wales

4 April 2021

[Food poverty: rising number of children in England eligible for free school meals](#)

The Guardian

30 March 2021

[Give poor pupils meals in summer holidays, says new children's tsar Rachel de Souza](#)

The Times [subscription required]

16 March 2021

[Rashford demands a 'meal a day' for all school pupils in need](#)

The Guardian

20 January 2021

[Minister brands free school meals hamper sent to mother 'completely unacceptable'](#)

Sky News

12 January 2021

[Surge in number of UK children applying for free school meals](#)

The Guardian

12 October 2020

[Around three in 10 school-aged children are on free school meals, research claims](#)

The Independent

12 October 2020

[Free school meal availability blog](#)

Department for Education

15 June 2020

[Free schools meals measure masks north-south divide in pupil poverty](#)

Tes

5 September 2017

3.2 Press Releases

[Education Secretary outlines plans to support young people](#)

Department for Education

6 January 2021

[New winter package to provide further support for children and families](#)

Department for Work and Pensions

8 November 2020

[Voucher scheme launches for schools providing free school meals](#)

Department for Education

31 March 2020

4. Further Reading

4.1 Reports and Journal Articles

Child Poverty Action Group, [Poverty in the pandemic: an update on the impact of coronavirus on low-income families and children](#), 14 December 2020

The Children's Society, [Post-Covid Policy: child poverty, social security and housing](#), 1 October 2020

Child Poverty Action Group, [Universal infant free school meals](#), October 2020

Research Papers in Education, [Assessing the impact of Pupil Premium funding on primary school segregation and attainment](#), 29 Mar 2021

Institute for Fiscal Studies, [Breakfast clubs work their magic in disadvantaged English schools](#), 4 November 2016

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