



School Meals Funding Deficiencies

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For many, January feels like a bleak month, as the twinkling lights of Christmas are extinguished for another year. Families across Northern Ireland (NI) must also contemplate an additional financial burden as the price of a school meal in NI is set to increase by 50p. For nursery school children this will bring the cost of a school meal to £3.00, for children in primary or special schools it will rise to £3.10 and the cost of food in secondary school canteens will be increased by 19%. The Education Authority has made a commitment that they will increase the Free School Meal (FSM) allowance for students in post-primary school to meet this price increase. However, the wider context for the increase in the cost of school meals is a £300 million funding shortfall for the scheme (Education Authority, 2025), which will directly impact the ability of many to access a hot school meal. The cuts being made will further compound erosion in support for low-income families, including the removal of FSM grants during the school holidays in 2023 (pupils previously received around £27 a fortnight during holiday periods).

Access to a school meal has long been recognised as a crucial tool to promote better health and wellbeing, improved educational outcomes and social benefits for children and young people. In recognition of the benefits, Governments in England, Scotland and Wales have taken significant steps in the last ten years to expand school meal entitlement. Most recently, the Labour Government

announced that FSM entitlement would extend to all households in receipt of Universal Credit, which effectively removes the current £7,400 means-test for families in England. This new policy will be rolled out in September 2026. At present, young children in reception, year 1 and year 2 (up to age 7) are entitled to a Universal FSM in England. This intervention was introduced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government in 2015. Meanwhile, the Welsh Government provides Universal FSM for all primary school children (up to age 11). This was the result of a “Co-Operation Agreement” signed between Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru in 2021. The Scottish Government provides Universal FSM for children to Primary 5 (up to age 10) which aligns with its long-term commitment to tackle child poverty (Scottish Government, 2022). It began rolling out expanded provision in 2016, with Universal FSM initially secured for infants who attended extended early years provision. The scheme was subsequently extended for all pupils to Primary 4 in August 2021 and to Primary 5 pupils in January 2022. All children who attend special schools are also entitled to a FSM in Scotland.

In the Republic of Ireland, the Government made a commitment that all primary school children would receive a hot school meal by 2025 and the latest Programme for Government commits to extending provision to children and young people in secondary education ‘over the lifetime of the next government.’

NI is a firm outlier, in that it does not provide any Universal entitlement to FSM. It also implements a significantly higher means-test threshold (£15,390). Analysis by Gleghorne (2025) shows that this cut-off point fails to ensure that all children in poverty have access to a hot meal. Using Family Resource Survey data from 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20, Gleghorne found that the current eligibility criteria 'are extremely inaccurate, with only 59% of children in poverty eligible for FSM and, conversely, only a third of children eligible for FSM experiencing poverty.' It also found that raising the income threshold would not address this disparity, due to requirement that households must also be entitled to social security. In addition, growing numbers of children in poverty are in working families who are not entitled to means-tested benefits. Therefore, it is likely that the rise in the cost of a school meal will have the most significant impact on those families who are unable to access FSM entitlement, but who are experiencing poverty.

The Education Authority announced the rise in the cost of a school meal in November 2025. The

decision was not subject to NI Executive approval as it does not require new legislation to be passed in the NI Assembly. This essentially means that it was not subject to a public consultation process, despite the negative impact that it will have on children and families.

The Labour Government identified the expansion of FSM as a key plank in its recently published UK Child Poverty Strategy (HM Government, 2025). However, the announcement extended solely to England, despite the fact that the strategy is intended to cover all four countries in the United Kingdom (UK). This arguably indicates the increasing importance of devolved policy making in this area, as NI has devolved responsibility for education. This Feature has demonstrated a stark divergence in the prioritisation of FSM for children in NI compared to the other countries in the UK and across the border in the Republic of Ireland. Despite rising child poverty rates in NI, the impact of school meals funding deficiencies will be experienced primarily by the next generation.

References

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