

<b>Report Title</b>	Food Poverty: Eligibility, accessibility and update of Free School Meals
<b>Meeting:</b>	Children & Young People Scrutiny Commission
<b>Date:</b>	31st October 2022
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### Report Summary

It is estimated that after the cost of housing is taken into consideration, 48% of children are living in poverty in Hackney. Taking the current cost of living crisis into consideration, it is clear that poverty and food insecurity will have a significant impact on local children and families and for local services that support them, including local schools and education settings.

Children and Young People (CYP) Scrutiny Commission is assessing what role schools & settings can play in responding to local food insecurity and pupil hunger (i.e. FSM and breakfast club provision), along with assessing how schools & settings are supported in this role and what additional support could be provided.

All maintained schools, academies and free schools are required to provide free school meals (FSM) to eligible children. A pupil's eligibility for FSM is based upon their parents entitlement to certain welfare benefits, predominantly Universal Credit where annual income does not exceed £7,400. Parents can apply for FSM via local authority portals which automatically check ongoing eligibility.

Nationally there were 1.9m pupils known to be eligible for FSM in 2021/22 or 22.5% of all state funded pupils. This figure has risen year on year since 2019.

In 2022, there were 13,352 pupils eligible for FSM in Hackney, or 38% of all state funded pupils. This is significantly higher than national (22.5%) and regional (24.6%) figures and 7th highest among all English local authorities. There is considerable variation in FSM eligibility among local schools with rates varying from 6 to 67% among primaries and 3% to 68% among secondaries.

The current rate of funding for FSM is £2.41 per pupil meal. The funding rate (set by central government) for FSM has failed to keep pace with price inflation which

has led to pressures on school catering services (and their contractors). A collective approach to school catering may become more attractive to schools as this may offer cost efficiencies.

Many local schools also provide Breakfast Clubs to their pupils, whilst some of these were provided free of charge, the average daily cost was £2.15 per day. The nature, focus and reach of breakfast club provision varies from school to school.

Council wide food poverty reduction work will focus on awareness raising of local help available to local families amongst schools in the autumn term so that parents can be directed to appropriate support.

## **Food Poverty: eligibility, accessibility and uptake of free school meals (FSM) and breakfast club provision.**

### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The cost of living crisis is affecting families across England. As food and energy prices increase, families are facing hardship and having to make difficult choices in balancing household budgets. There is strong evidence to suggest that the increase in the cost of living is contributing to increasing levels of food insecurity. September 2022 data from the [Office for National Statistics](#) (ONS) suggest that that of the 91% of adults in Great Britain who reported an increase in their cost of living:
- 95% saw the price of their food shopping go up; and
  - 44% had started spending less on essentials including food.
- 1.2 Food poverty will impact more on those families with lower household income or who may be reliant on state assistance (i.e. Universal Credit). [Data](#) from the Trussell Trust (2022) suggest that for families in receipt of Universal Credit:
- 56% were going without one of the basics of keeping warm, fed and clothed;
  - 50% were behind with their bills and 40% had fallen into debt;
  - 33% had not been able to afford adequate food (missing meals)
- 1.3 National food insecurity [tracking data](#) indicated that household food insecurity has been growing since August 2021 and that as of April 2022, 15.5% of all households were food insecure (where individuals have eaten less, skipped meals or not eaten at all). Standard definitions of food insecurity are:
- *Low food security*: where households reduce the quality, variety and desirability;
  - *Very low food security*: where household members disrupt eating patterns, miss meals or reduce intake because of the lack of resources.
- 1.4 There is now a growing commentary on the impact that poverty and food insecurity is having on households and on children in particular:
- With UK charities [reporting](#) families are skipping meals to pay for other household essentials (e.g. fuel);
  - Community food groups reported expected [Food bank usage](#) to increase to 1 in 10 parents;
  - [Schools, settings and community groups](#) and other [educational institutions](#) report that children are accessing school hungry, tired and anxious.
- 1.5 After the cost of housing is taken into consideration it is estimated that approximately 48% of children in Hackney are living in relative poverty. In this context, poverty and food insecurity is likely to be a significant challenge for schools in autumn and winter terms as the cost of living crisis intensifies.

## **2. Children and Young People Scrutiny Commission**

2.1 Given their daily contact and general oversight of children, schools and education settings are in a relatively good position to identify children and families in need, including those that may be experiencing food insecurity. The aim of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Commission is to:

- Further understand the nature and extent of pupil hunger in schools and its impact on pupils and wider schooling;
- Assess what role schools currently play in responding to pupil hunger (e.g. access to free school meals and breakfast clubs);
- Understand how schools are supported in this role, and their connectivity to food poverty programmes / networks.
- Identify what additional support would help schools in this role.

2.2 The scrutiny session will aim to assess the following:

1) *Assess the eligibility, accessibility and uptake of FSM* entitlements of pupils across Hackney; how Hackney Education and local schools and settings are promoting FSM and efforts to ensure eligible families are applying and ensuring that the current system is effective in reaching those children in need? To assess how children in other educational settings such as Alternative Provision, Independent Schools, early years settings can access FSM provision.

2) Assess the nature, scope and extent of School Breakfast Clubs across Hackney; to understand how these are funded and supported how this provision is targeted.

3) Ascertain how Hackney Education and the wider Council supports schools and settings with particularly high levels of vulnerability and assess how aware/ prepared local schools, settings and teachers are to refer children and families identified to be in need to local food/help programmes?

4) Seek assurance on stability and continuity of school catering contracts: understanding that the cost of living crisis is also impacting the business sector to seek assurance on local arrangements with school catering and the maintenance of high quality standards of provision within the current funding scheme.

## **3. Free School Meals (FSM)**

### *FSM Eligibility*

3.1 Since September 2014, schools in England have been required to provide free lunches to all pupils in reception, year 1 and year 2 who are not otherwise entitled to benefits-related free school meals.

3.2 All maintained schools, academies and free schools are required to provide free school meals to children that meet the eligibility criteria. Where a child eligible for free school

meals attends alternative provision funded by their school, the school should advise the alternative provision provider and fund the lunch.

3.3 In early years settings, government funding is intended to cover the cost to deliver 15 (or 30) hours a week of free, high quality, flexible childcare for all three and four year olds and for two year olds who meet the eligibility requirement. It is not intended to cover the cost of meals, consumables, additional hours or additional services. This means parents may be charged for meals and snacks, and as well as for other consumables such as nappies, wipes and sun cream. In addition, eligible 2 year old's and children subject to targeted early help receive food vouchers during the holidays

3.4 Eligibility for FSM is determined by the government and the criteria are outlined [here](#) for parents with children attending Hackney schools. In summary, pupils are entitled to FSM beyond Primary Year 2 providing their parents meet the eligibility criteria. Free school meals are available to pupils in receipt of, or whose parents are in receipt of one or more of the following benefits:

- Universal Credit (provided annual net earned income is not more than £7,400)
- Income Support
- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- The guarantee element of Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit (provided parents 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 four weeks after you stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit

3.5 Eligibility for FSM is now predominantly centred upon Universal Credit entitlement where income is not greater than £7,400 per annum. It should be noted that, despite the cost of living pressures, this income threshold (and other eligibility criteria) have not changed since 2018.

3.6 Prior to the Covid pandemic, children in households with *no recourse to public funds* were not eligible for FSM. During the pandemic however, this guidance was changed to allow households with no recourse to public funds to apply. In June 2022, FSM eligibility was [permanently extended](#) to all children in households with no recourse to public funding.

3.7 For comparison, different eligibility criteria exist across constituent countries of the UK.

- In Scotland FSM are now available for all children in years 1-5 with roll out to years 1-7 expected by 2024/25.
- In Wales, the government has committed to extend FSM eligibility to all primary school pupils by 2024.

- In Northern Ireland the Universal Credit Cap for entitlement is £14,000 p.a (which is twice that of families resident in England).

#### *Applying for FSM*

- 3.7 Hackney Education provides a secure, robust and accessible system for families to apply for free school meals. The online FSM application form links directly with the DfE ECS (eligibility checking system) and parents are advised about whether they are eligible at the point of submitting their application online.
- 3.8 Families only need to apply once for each child because Hackney Education retains the details of all applicants throughout their compulsory education. Families who have applied previously but were ineligible at the time are regularly re-checked against the ECS to determine if any change in circumstances mean they become eligible.
- 3.9 Information about the eligibility of all pupils in Hackney schools is shared securely and in real-time with schools via SAM (school access module). Each child on the school's roll is reported as either a) applied and eligible, b) applied but not eligible or c) not applied. Immediately a FSM application is processed, the child and their eligibility status will be visible to their school who can update their local records to attract funding at the following census point.

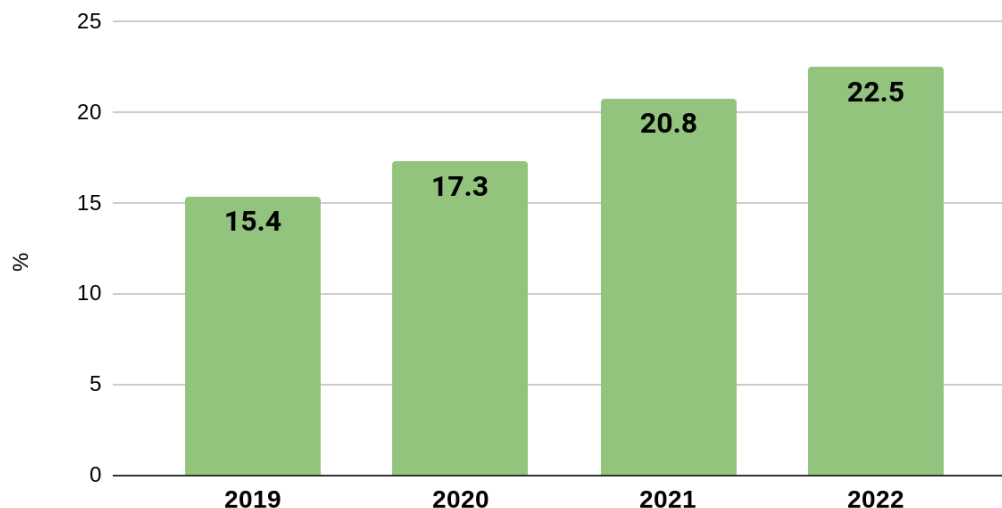
#### *Promotion of FSM*

- 3.10 Hackney Education's FSM application system effectively allows schools to focus their efforts targeting families in their school who have not applied. Schools are uniquely placed to communicate directly with their families, identifying those who are likely to qualify for FSM (or who they suspect may qualify) and prompt application.
- 3.11 Most local schools provide information for parents about how to access FSM on their websites, including a link to the Hackney Education FSM online application form. Schools can individually identify families who are eligible but do not access FSM for their children. The exact number of families who may be eligible but do not apply is unknown.
- 3.12 To ensure eligible children have applied and are known to schools, offers made by the Admissions team at the point of entry to reception and at transfer to secondary school promote FSM application and highlight the additional funding this brings schools.
- 3.13 The Hackney FSM website, with further details about the application process and the ECS, can be accessed [HERE](#).

#### *FSM Data - National*

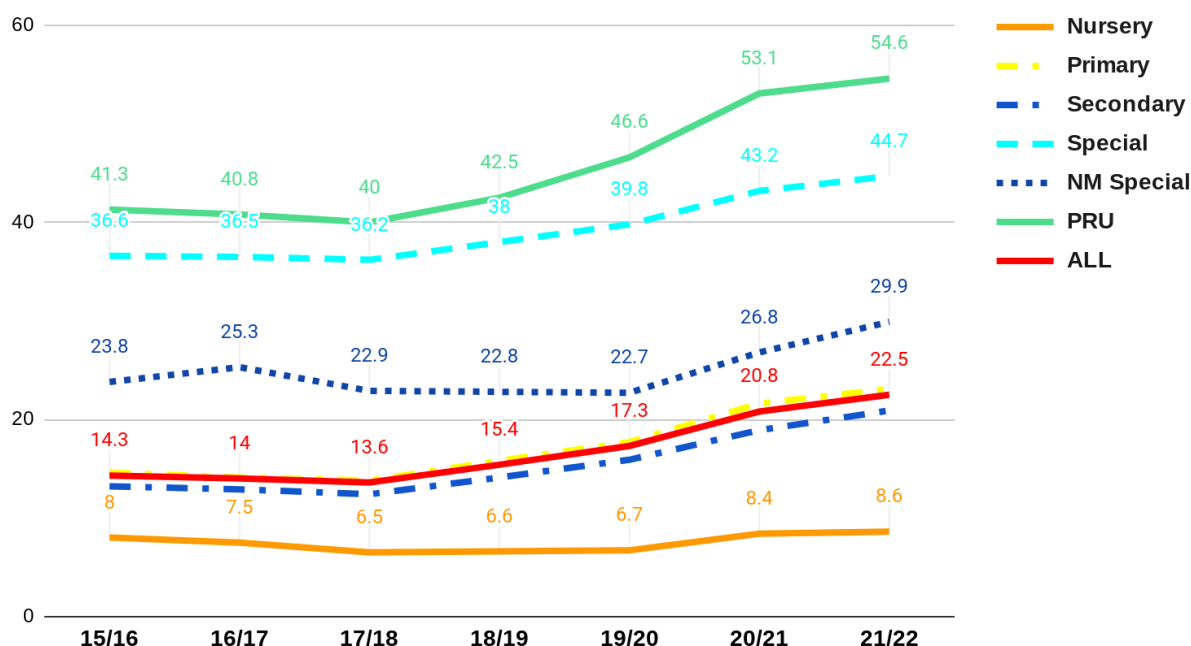
- 3.14 As of January 2022, there were 1.9 million pupils known to be eligible for FSM which equated to 22.5% of all state funded pupils. Nationally, the proportion of pupils entitled to FSM has increased year on year since 2019 (Chart 1)..

**Chart 1 - Percentage of pupils eligible for FSM in state funded secondary schools (2019-2022)**



3.15 Nationally, FSM eligibility has increased across all state funded educational settings since 2017/18. In 2021/22, FSM eligibility was highest among pupils attending Pupil Referral Units (PRU) where 54.6% of pupils were eligible (Chart 2). Higher rates of FSM eligibility are also recorded among pupils attending state funded special schools and non-maintained special schools than for either primary and secondary school settings (Chart 2).

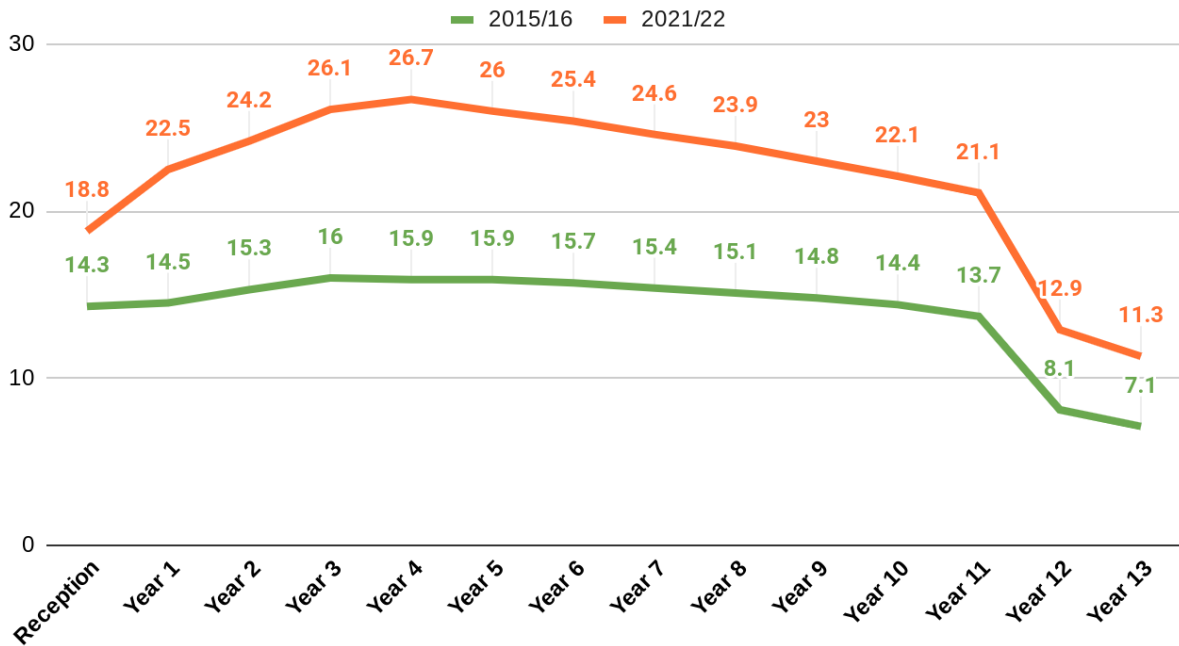
**Chart 2 -FSM entitlement in state funded schools 2015/16 to 2021/22**



3.16 FSM eligibility peaks for children in school year 4 and gradually declines thereafter (Chart 3). In 2021/22, 26.7% of year 4 pupils were eligible for free school meals compared to

21.1% of year 11 pupils. Eligibility decreases more sharply for children in post 16 education.

**Chart 3 - Percentage of pupils eligible for FSM by year group 2015/16 and 2021/22**



*Hackney FSM Data*

3.18 The most recent data (2021/22) indicates that there were 13,352 pupils who were eligible for FSM in Hackney which equates to 38.8% of pupils across all state funded education settings (Table 1).

3.19 FSM entitlement in Hackney is higher among secondary school pupils (41.1%) than primary school pupils (36.5%) (Table 1). Higher rates of FSM eligibility are recorded among pupils attending both special schools (62.6%) and PRU (47.4%) in Hackney (Table 1).

3.20. The proportion of pupils who are eligible for FSM in Hackney is higher across each educational setting (nursery, primary, secondary, special, PRU) compared to both national and regional figures (Table 1).

<b>Table 1 - Percentage of pupils eligible for FSM across educational settings</b>				
<b>State funded setting</b>		<b>HACKNEY</b>	<b>London</b>	<b>England</b>
<b>Nursery</b>	No.	56	1,017	3,267
	%	<b>26.3%</b>	<b>12.3%</b>	<b>8.6%</b>

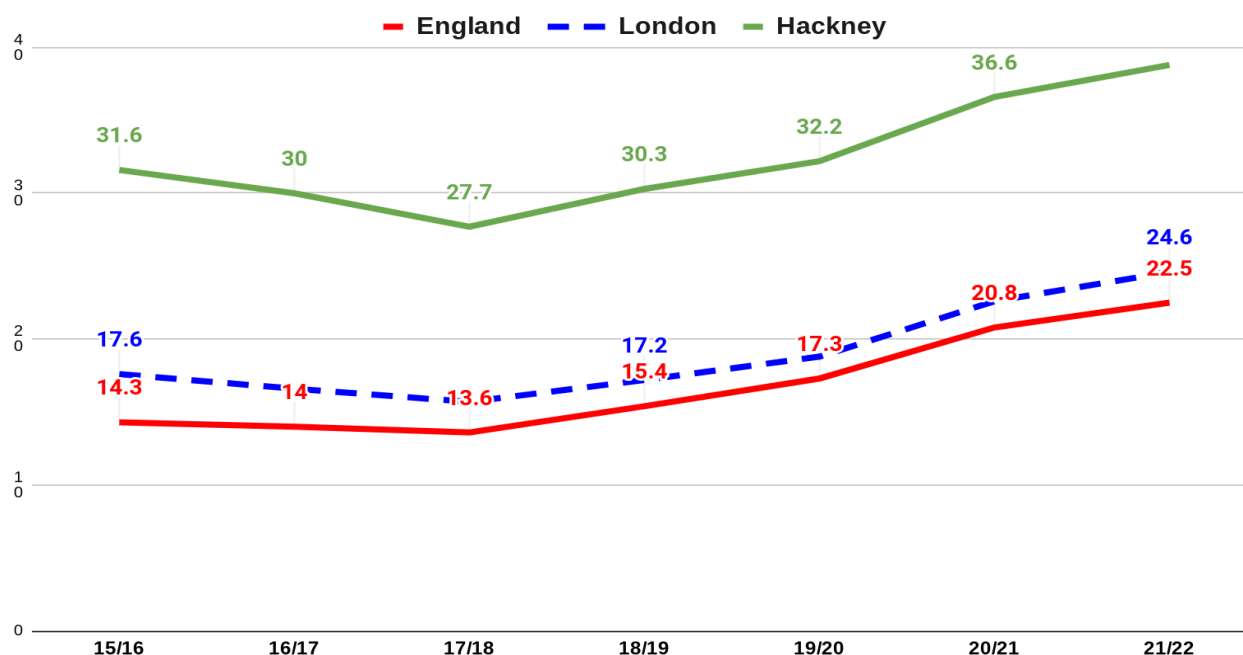


<b>Primary</b>	No.	6,923	170,420	1,075,994
	%	<b>36.5%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>23.1%</b>
<b>Secondary</b>	No.	6,062	140,400	747,143
	%	<b>41.1%</b>	<b>24.6%</b>	<b>20.9%</b>
<b>Special</b>	No.	284	9,545	63,474
	%	<b>62.6%</b>	<b>46.9%</b>	<b>44.7%</b>
<b>PRU</b>	No.	27	924	6,385
	%	<b>47.4%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>54.6%</b>
<b>Total*</b>	No.	13,352	322,393	1,897,449
	%	<b>38.8%</b>	<b>24.6%</b>	<b>22.5%</b>

\*Including NM Special (not tabulated)

3.21 The percentage of pupils eligible for FSM in Hackney is almost twice the figure compared to both regional and national averages, and has been a confirmed trend for the period 2015/16-2021/22 (Chart 4). The percentage of pupils eligible for FSM has been on an upward trajectory since 2017/18 in Hackney, London and England (Chart 4).

**Chart 4 - Percentage of pupils eligible for FSM at state funded schools in Hackney, London and England 2015/16-2021/22.**



3.22 In comparison to all other local authorities in England, Hackney currently has the 7th highest rate (38.8%) of pupil entitlement to FSM (Table 2). Other neighbouring boroughs

also figure prominently in this ranking with Islington ranking 1st (41.1%) and Tower Hamlets 8th (38.4%) (Table 2). There are, however, wide differences in the proportion of pupils who are entitled to FSM among other local authorities.

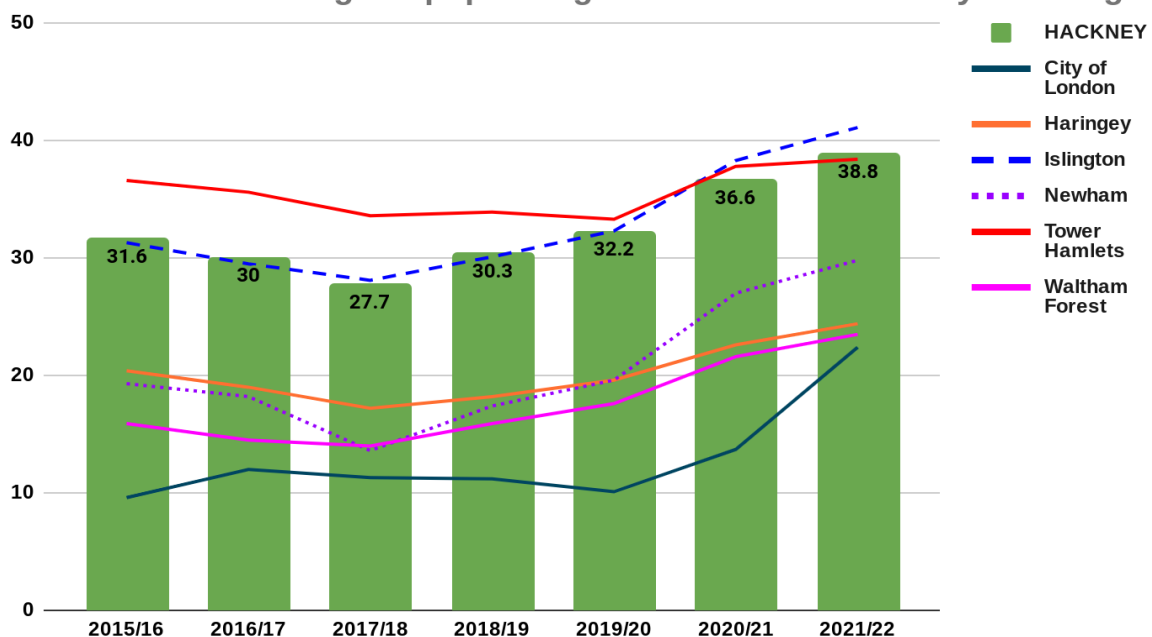
Table 2

Local Authorities with the highest and lowest rates of FSM eligibility					
January 2022, pupils attending state-funded schools, %					
Highest			Lowest		
1	Islington	41.1	1	Isles of Scilly	1.9
2	Manchester	40.8	2	Wokingham	9.0
3	Blackpool	40.4	3	Rutland	9.8
4	Camden	39.2	4	Windsor and Maidenhead	11.7
5	Knowsley	39.2	5	Bracknell Forest	11.8
6	Newcastle upon Tyne	38.8	6	Central Bedfordshire	12.3
7	Hackney	38.8	7	Buckinghamshire	12.3
8	Tower Hamlets	38.4	8	Richmond upon Thames	12.4
9	Middlesbrough	38.2	9	Surrey	12.8
10	Halton	37.3	10	Kingston upon Thames	12.9

Source: Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2022](#), 9 June 2022

3.23 Comparing the percentage of FSM entitlement across neighbouring boroughs confirms that Hackney has a similar rate with both Islington and Tower Hamlets, but higher than other adjacent boroughs over the past 7 years (Chart 5).

Chart 5 - Percentage of pupils eligible for FSM in Hackney and neigh...

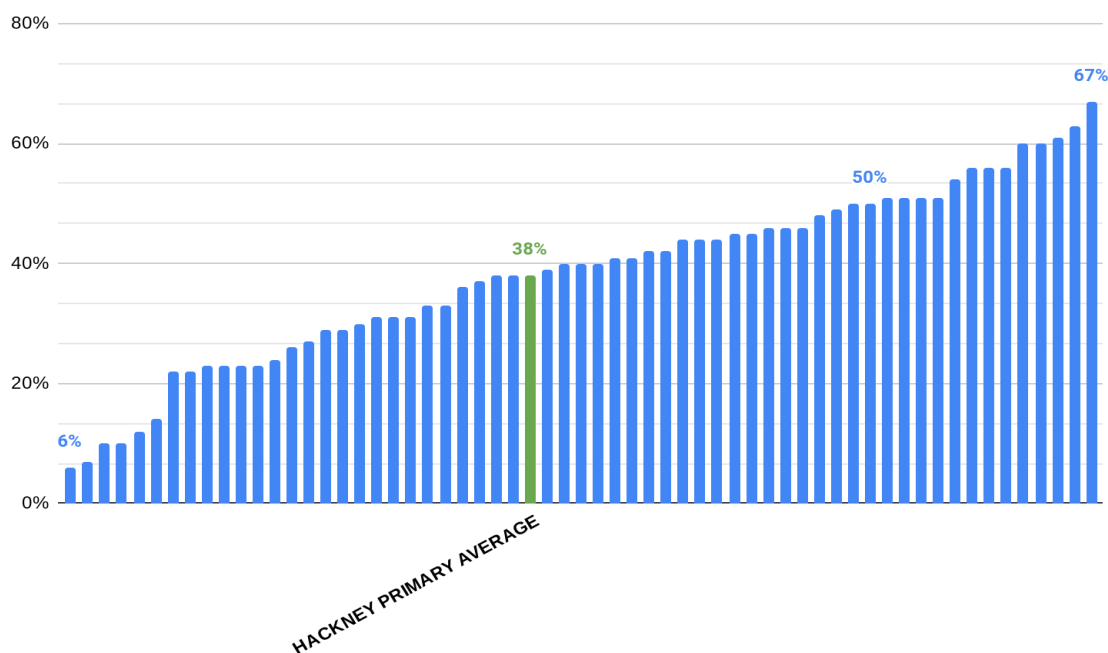


3.24 It should be noted that a small number of London boroughs provide free school meals to all *primary school* children irrespective of entitlement.

- [Tower Hamlets](#) introduced FSM to all primary school aged children in 2014 which was initially [part-funded through Public Health](#).
- [Islington](#) has provided FSM to all primary school children since 2011, where a recent (2019) [audit report](#) suggests a 94% uptake amongst infants and 84% among primary school children at an annual cost of £2.45m.

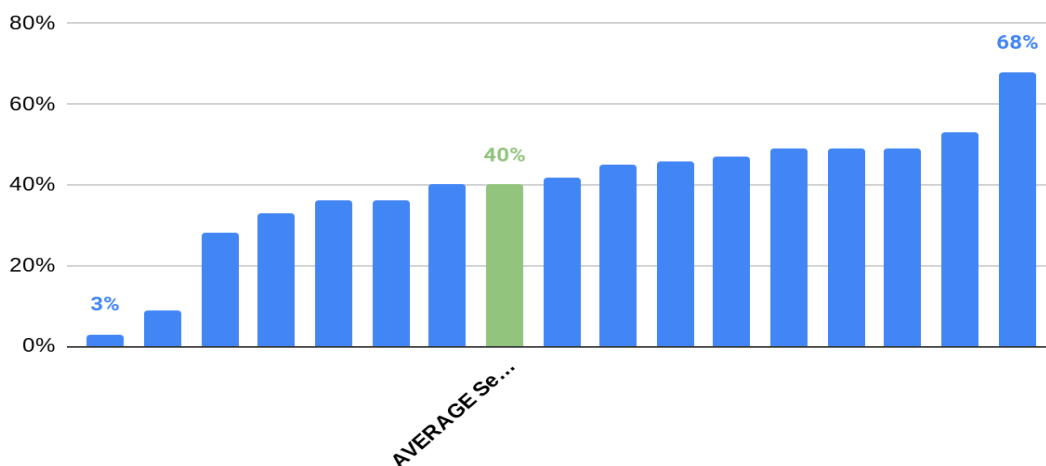
3.25 The percentage of children entitled to FSM across individual primary schools varies widely. Of the 60 state funded nurseries and primary schools in Hackney, FSM entitlement ranged from 6% (lowest) up to 67% (highest) (Chart 6). The average for all state funded nurseries and primary schools was 38% (Chart 6).

**Chart 6 - Percentage of children entitled to Free School Meals at Hackney PRIMARY schools (at 2022 Census)**



3.26 A similarly broad range of pupil entitlement to FSM is demonstrated across 17 secondary schools in Hackney. The range of FSM entitlement ranged from 68% (highest) to 3% (lowest), the average being 40% (Chart 7).

**Chart 7 - Percentage of children entitled to Free School Meals Hackney SECONDARY Schools (at school census...**



3.27 A small number of primary and secondary schools in Hackney provide a universal FSM service to all their pupils, irrespective of their FSM entitlement. These include the Urswick Secondary School and St Mary's Primary School in Stoke Newington (other schools may also provide universal FSM).

3.28 In Hackney, children attending Children Centres and early years settings over the lunch time generally receive a meal as part of the setting fees or free entitlement. It is unusual for a charge for lunch to be made on top of setting fees. Where a child is funded through free entitlement alone, settings are expected to offer reasonable options to a parent regarding food during the day; in most cases where the child attends over the lunch period, this will be included as part of the free entitlement.

3.29 Children attending early years settings classed as vulnerable (i.e., on a social care plan) will have lunches funded whilst at the setting.

*Cost of school meals to parents in Hackney*

3.30 Costs of school meals to parents that are required to pay is set by the school and varies from school to school. A brief audit across a sample of primary and secondary schools produced the following range of costs (where a charge was made):

- Primary School £2 to £2.40
- Secondary school £2.40-£2.50

*Funding for FSM*

3.31 Funding for FSM is provided by the central government via a unit rate per meal. The current unit rate of funding for FSM (May 2022) is £2.41 per meal, which is allocated through the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and is not ring-fenced.

- 3.32 Funding levels for FSM have not increased significantly over the past 8 years rising from £2.30 in 2014 to £2.41 in 2022, which equates to a 9.6% increase. The most recent rate announcement uplifted the rate from £2.34 in 2021 to £2.41 in 2022, 7p or 3% increase.
- 3.33 Using data from the most recent [school census](#) (21/22), approximately 1.9 million pupils were eligible for FSM. This suggests that the national cost of FSM is around £4.6m per day.

#### *School Catering Services*

- 3.34 LACA, the school caterers association, noted that the failure to keep the FSM funding rate in line with rises in food and energy prices was placing [acute pressures](#) on its members. LACA reported that all caterers were having to reflect on the inclusion of more expensive (meat and fish) products within their [menus](#), and that there were viability concerns around smaller contractors.
- 3.35 Until recently, a catering framework for maintained primary schools was in place. However, due to low uptake, this was recently handed back to schools. As such, all maintained schools & academies will directly contract their own catering providers or provide this service inhouse.
- 3.36 Olive Catering recently took over catering for 6 primary schools previously using the framework. Whilst it is felt that this company offers stability to those schools working with them, the per price unit for each meal did increase as a result of the new contract which coincided with the start of the general increase in the cost of living. Future re-procurement will likely be at risk of similar price increases. For information, the unit price per meal for the 6 schools under this contract averages at £2.38
- 3.37 In light of this, the collective approach through a catering framework may become more attractive to schools in the future and Hackney Education will keep this discussion open with schools. If sufficient interest is seen, a project would need to be undertaken to determine requirements and formally procure providers.
- 3.38 Whilst there is no catering framework for schools, Hackney Education does hold a framework for Children's Centres. This contract is currently held by Ashlyns Organic. The contract is subject to regular review with feedback generally being positive. It is felt that the provision is stable in the current climate.
- 3.39 The Children's Centres catering framework has been extended to January 2023 with a further extension under consideration to tie it in with the ongoing Early Years review. Once the framework is reviewed, it is likely that costs will increase, as witnessed in the recent primary school procurement exercise.

#### *FSM and Pupil Premium*

- 3.40 Free School Meal entitlement is also linked to [Pupil Premium](#) funding for schools. Pupil

premium is funding to improve education outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in schools in England. This equates to an additional **£1,385** for a primary school aged child and **£985** for secondary school aged child.

### *FSM Commentary*

3.41 The cost of living crisis has precipitated wide ranging analysis and commentary of the free school meals. A summary of key themes within this is provided below:

- *Children living in poverty but not able to access FSM:* [CPAG estimates](#) that 800,000 children currently living in poverty are not entitled to FSM under current eligibility criteria. Many of these children are in working families who exceed the threshold but continue to be in poverty;
- A more simplified process and extension of the income threshold would increase FSM to those that qualify: [LGA](#) estimates that more than 1 million school children could be eligible for FSM if the sign up process was simplified and extended. LGA and CPAG estimate that 215,000 additional children would be entitled to FSM under automatic enrollment;
- [National Food Strategy](#), [Public campaigns](#), [political campaigning](#), and [strong public support](#) for expansion of FSM entitlements;
- Recent [Cost Benefit Analysis](#) by Urban Health (2022) suggests that there are significant long term financial benefits (education and employment as well as health and nutrition) for the expansion of FSM to those families in receipt of Universal Credit *and* for the universal roll out of the service to all pupils.

## **4. Breakfast Clubs**

4.1 Breakfast Clubs are not required, though many schools do provide these for their pupils. Many schools & settings in Hackney now offer breakfast clubs and can charge between £1 and £4 a session. See [here](#) for information regarding afterschool & breakfast clubs in the borough.

4.2 [Data collated by Hackney Education](#) demonstrates that most local primary schools (52) provided some form of breakfast club provision for their pupils (though the nature of and focus of such clubs vary). Data revealed that:

- Provision took place between the hour range of 7.30am - 9.00am;
- Daily costs ranged from free to £6.50 with the average cost being £2.15;
- Some schools provided subsidies for children on FSM, with in-school siblings.

4.3 A [national school breakfast club programme](#) supports schools to provide this service in areas of high social disadvantage (where more than 40% of pupils in bands A-F of the income deprivation affecting children index - IDACI). Participating schools receive a 100% subsidy for Breakfast Club provision through to July 2022, but this is reduced to 75% thereafter with the expectation that remaining funding will be topped up by other sources.

- 4.4 The Breakfast Club Programme has supported over 2,400 schools (1,812 in its general programme and 650 through its Covid programme) to provide Breakfast Clubs to over 375,000 pupils. The programme provides free healthy breakfast foods which are delivered weekly to participating schools as well as a start up grant (£500) for new facilities (i.e. toasters). The programme is designed to support new breakfast club provision in schools as well developing existing provision where there was scope for improvement.
- 4.5 All educational settings are included (primary, secondary, special PRU etc) are eligible to apply to be part of the national Breakfast Club Programme. Breakfast Clubs are provided in a wide range of formats to reflect needs of the school:
- Classic - sit down breakfast in dining halls;
  - Classroom - 'soft start' incorporated as part of a 15 min earlier start to lessons;
  - Playground bagels - tray of warm bagels for children in the playground in the morning;
  - Healthy grab and Go - healthy flexible options which can be provided quickly to large numbers of pupils;
  - Late provisions - for pupils arriving late in school (with no breakfast).
- 4.6 Data from the National Breakfast Club programme (supported by Family Action) indicates that among schools in Hackney:
- 75 schools in Hackney which were eligible to participate in the scheme (at least 50% of pupils fell within IDACI bands A-F );
  - 29 schools had expressed an interest in joining;
  - 9 schools had joined.
- 4.7 Aside from addressing pupils accessing schools hungry and wider family food insecurity , school breakfast clubs have shown positive impacts in relation to:
- School attendance;
  - School behaviour;
  - Readiness to start the day, classroom concentration and attainment;
  - Social skills;
  - Parental engagement.
- 4.8 The full impact assessment of the national Breakfast Club programme can be read [here](#) .

## **5. Working with Schools**

- 5.1 Hackney's schools and settings are well placed to signpost support available for residents outlined on the [Hackney money help and advice](#) webpage on our website. The food poverty reduction work currently underway with the Council's Policy & Strategy and Here to Help teams will be promoted over the Autumn Term, with a focus on awareness raising amongst schools of the support available and how schools can direct parents & carers to appropriate support.

5.2 Currently schools cannot directly refer to food banks, due to the numbers asking for this service. [Hackney Food Bank](#) has instead asked that parents in need are signposted onto organisations that work closely with the food bank (e.g., Shoreditch Trust and Family Action) .