

## REPORT FOR SCHOOLS FORUM

<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	24 <sup>th</sup> April 2013
<b>SUBJECT:</b>	Free School Meal Uptake
<b>Report by:</b>	John O'Connor
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<b>Is the report confidential?</b>	No

1.	<b>Purpose</b>
	To update School Forum (SF) members on the actions taken as a result of a communication from the Department for Education (DfE) about free school meal (FSM) uptake rates.
2.	<b>Background / Context</b>
	<p>The DfE wrote to all Director's of Children's Services in November 2012 with regards to a piece of work that they had completed about matching benefits data with school census data. This enabled a comparison of '<b>entitled to receive FSM</b>' to '<b>claim FSM</b>' for the country and individual Local Authority (LA) areas. It revealed that about 3%, or 200,000 children, nationally were not using their entitlement to claim a free, nutritious meal.</p> <p>Lincolnshire was reported to have 11,000 children in receipt of FSM but an estimated 15,000 entitled to do so meaning that 4,000 children were entitled to a FSM yet no application had been made by the parents for one.</p> <p>In England, pupils in state-funded schools are <b>entitled to receive</b> FSM if their parents are in receipt of any of the following benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Income Support</li> <li>• Income-based Job Seekers' Allowance</li> <li>• Income-related Employment and Support Allowance</li> <li>• Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999</li> <li>• the Guaranteed element of State Pension Credit</li> <li>• 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, as assessed by HMRC 1(unless in the 4 week run-on – this is the period immediately after the applicant stops work or reduces their hours and no longer qualifies for working tax credit, but still receives it for a further 4 weeks until it stops)</li> </ul>

Children who receive a qualifying benefit in their own right are also entitled to receive FSM.

In order to **claim FSM**, families who meet the entitlement criteria outlined above have to register for FSM via schools or LAs. For Lincolnshire, our website makes it clear how families can do this and allows them to complete an on-line form using only minimal information – they only need to supply identifying information of who they are and not any income or benefit details (parents who call the Customer Service Centre will have the form completed on their behalf over the phone). The vast majority of parents (approximately 75%) apply on-line.

Lincolnshire has access to the 'Eligibility Checking Service' (ECS) operated by the DfE which enables electronic checking of entitlement without the need for paper evidence. Families who complete the form are informed of the outcome within 3 days if a postal reply is required (it can be as little as 6 working hours if an email address is provided). If parents include the details of the school the child attends on the form then a parallel communication is sent to the school alerting them to the outcome.

At the time of the receipt of the DfE's letter, Lincolnshire had a recorded 12,200 children claiming a FSM meaning that the estimated 4,000 is more likely to be a realistic 2,800. At the time of this report the majority of the actions have been completed and the number of recorded children claiming FSMs is now 12,697 meaning there could be a potential gap of 2,303.

The DfE's analysis confirmed that the figures quoted were likely to be high estimates as one group of benefits that do not entitle families to FSMs cannot be resolved out from the data. They also noted that some LAs had greater than 100% uptake which suggests that the status of eligible for FSM is not routinely checked. In Lincolnshire we offer a termly checking service for all entitled families to confirm their eligibility status, which the majority of schools and academies use. The traded model is based on a school's size and is currently 66 pence per pupil on roll, which for the majority of schools is below the value of 1 pupil premium. It is recognised that a small school with few eligible children may not find this value for money and may choose to do the checking of eligibility themselves. As we undertake routine checking our eligible number of children is likely to be more accurate than the majority of LAs.

At present the benefit system does not automatically entitle parents to FSM for their children it is still expected that they will make a separate application to their LA for FSMs. There has been much comment on enabling this centrally but as yet this has not become a reality. **The LA does not know which families are in receipt of qualifying benefits so it does not have a target audience to focus on.**

Any pupil who qualifies for a FSM also qualifies the school for a pupil premium which is worth £900 for 2013/14 with an expected additional rise the year after (possibly £1,200). The pupil premium is in addition to the funding for a FSM as this factor is included in the school's budget shares i.e. the pupil premium does not actually pay for the meal itself.

A small group of officers reviewed the current uptake rate in December 2012 and devised a set of actions to try to improve future uptake.

3.	<p><b>Options/Conclusions</b></p> <p>The following actions were implemented:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contact was made with Lincoln Job Centre Plus to investigate what assistance they could offer to help identify families. In response they have agreed a pilot of 2 weeks in January to complete the LAs FSM online form with eligible families at the time of signing up for qualifying benefits. Contact has also been made with Boston, Spalding and Gainsborough Job Centres who will be highlighting FSMs to existing and new claimants using the translated FSM postcards. It will be evaluated after the pilot 2 weeks to see if this model can be cascaded across all of the centres across Lincolnshire or the region. These 2 weeks are just prior to the January census, where FSM data is collected. Job centres are aware that FSM promotion needs to be constant as family circumstances can change on a daily basis.</li> <li>• The profile of languages within Lincolnshire children was compared with that nationally and then cross referenced with that of the claiming rates in the DfE's data. This indicated that the under-claiming groups were disproportionately represented by eastern European families especially Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian families. As a result the current postcards and posters used to communicate how to claim FSM have been translated into these languages also.</li> <li>• Communication literature has been sent to all schools, all children's centres, district councils, voluntary agencies and selected local shops, language centres and community groups in the main town centres.</li> <li>• There will be an article in the spring edition of County News highlighting the benefit to the pupil and the school of claiming a FSM and how to do so.</li> <li>• An article promoting FSM is to be highlighted in the January edition of the termly newsletter, The Scoop, which is sent to all schools and catering providers.</li> <li>• Catering providers to be notified of the potential to increase the number of pupils accessing FSM. Officers to support in promoting and marketing to schools and parents.</li> <li>• FSM to be raised at the Childhood Obesity Steering Group so health visitors, school nurses and healthy schools coordinators become aware and so are able to promote to schools and parents.</li> <li>• The web form will be reviewed and remodelled to ensure that it is as straight forward as possible.</li> <li>• When families register on the on-line admissions system to apply for a school place they get a confirmation email which will now contain details of how to claim for a FSM and a link to our web form. The booklet that each family gets to support them with the admissions process will contain text about how to apply for FSM.</li> <li>• A template letter has been created and emailed to every school and academy just before the Christmas break as a tool that they can use to send to families who they think are entitled to claim for FSMs.</li> <li>• In the next financial year the government is introducing the Ever6FSM indicator to the pupil premium eligibility criteria – this means that if a child ever had a FSM in the last 6 years then the school qualifies for a pupil premium payment for that child, even if they were only entitled for a day. To assist schools and academies with this we are looking at the implications, cost-wise, of modifying our FSM system to enable schools</li> </ul>
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	to check their data on their management information system against that which we hold to ensure that no eligible child is missing – this will be added into the FSM checking service as an enhancement.
<b>4.</b>	<b>Financial Implications</b>
	Each of the estimated 2,303 unclaimed FSMs equates to £900 pupil premium to a school/academy this financial year. This means that there is a potential £2,072,700 of extra money that can be brought into Lincolnshire schools.
<b>5.</b>	<b>Summary</b>
	<p>As both the school/academy and Local Authority do not know who the target audience is (those entitled to, but do not, claim FSMs) there is no direct action that can be taken.</p> <p>Raising awareness publically is the most advantageous marketing tool, but is something that needs repeating.</p> <p>In an attempt to address the stigma that is associated with claiming FSMs we have altered the emphasis as to how parents can help their schools by claiming for FSMs as the school will be able to claim extra funding to help educate children – i.e. parent, child and school all win!</p>