



2024-0008664DHPO

Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP
Minister for Schools

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Mr Joss MacDonald
Public Affairs Lead, The Food Foundation
By email: Joss.MacDonald@FoodFoundation.org.uk

12 April 2024

Dear Mr MacDonald,

Thank you for your letter of 14 March, signed by a number of organisations and individuals, regarding enrolment for free school meals (FSM). I would be grateful if you could please share my response with the other signatories.

The government wants as many eligible pupils as possible to benefit from a healthy and nutritious meal. As you have highlighted, maximising the take up of FSM is important in achieving this. To help ensure maximum take up, we want to make it as simple as possible for schools and local authorities to determine eligibility. We support this by providing an Eligibility Checking System to make the checking process as quick and straightforward as possible for schools and local authorities.

However, as you have rightly pointed out, there are numerous complex reasons as to why a family might not be taking up their free meal entitlement, which may include burdensome administration. Local authorities may wish to explore initiatives to maximise take up and to better understand these barriers that prevent such take up, whilst ensuring adherence to legal and data protection considerations.

The department does not routinely collect information on the proportion of pupils that may be entitled to FSM but do not make a claim, and so is not currently in a position to provide datasets on levels of under registration for FSM.

You also mention that there are a small number of local authorities who are trialling registration methods that involve an 'opt out / right to object' model. The department is aware of such efforts, noting the wide variety of methods currently being trialled across a number of local authorities to increase and maximise take up. Although we cannot endorse any particular approach, we continue to engage with key stakeholders in this area to better understand the effectiveness and impact of such adopted approaches.

Thank you for writing on this important matter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Damian Hinds', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Damian Hinds
Minister for Schools