

MOTION ON NOTICE



Date of Council Meeting: 27 January 2025

To call for auto enrolment for Free School Meals

The Education Act 1996 requires maintained schools and academies to provide free school meals (FSM) to disadvantaged pupils (defined by the pupil or their family being in receipt of certain benefits). A claim must be made by the pupil, their parent or another responsible adult, which is then checked for eligibility. There are barriers to enrolling, including the burdensome application process, uncertainty around the entitlement criteria, language or literacy issues, and a feeling of stigma or embarrassment.

Nationally, many pupils are missing out. In Plymouth, estimates are that there are approximately 1600 households, with 2600 children, who are eligible for FSM but not enrolled to receive it. As well as missing out on a free, nutritional hot lunch every school day, these families will be missing out on additional support available through school holidays

In addition, for each pupil enrolled for FSM, the school receives a 'Pupil Premium'. Plymouth's education system is missing out in the region of £2.5 million additional funding through the Pupil Premium.

There is a simple fix to this; to move to an automatic enrolment when families meet the criteria. This must happen at national level, with corresponding legislative changes.

Although local authorities can identify eligible families, as well as being complex, they would be open to legal challenge if they were to register pupils rather than having a request from a parent or other responsible adult.

To remove this burden from local authorities and ensure all children who are entitled to a Free School Meal are receiving it, we urge the Government to introduce an auto-enrolment system at the national level that would register eligible families to receive Free School Meals using benefits data, unless families decide to opt out.

Council resolves:

- That the Leader writes to Bridget Phillipson MP, Secretary of State for Education and Liz Kendall MP, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, requesting that;
 - auto-enrolment for free school meals be added to the anticipated Children's Wellbeing Bill
 - local education authorities are given the powers necessary to obtain and exchange the information necessary to identify and register all children eligible for FSM.
 - For Plymouth City Council to review the schemes put in place by some other local authorities and consider adopting an opt-out system for 2025/26, in the event that a national scheme has not been delivered.

Proposer: Cllr Maria Lawson

Seconder: Cllr Jaime Bannerman