

Department of Education Consultation
Review of Free School Meals and Uniform Grant Eligibility Criteria
Barnardo's NI response

Consultation Question 1

Later questions will ask about potential increases to the income threshold levels for those in receipt of Universal Credit. Leaving this aside, should the other current eligibility criteria remain the same?

- Yes, the eligibility criteria should remain the same
- No, the eligibility criteria should be changed

If you answered “No, the eligibility criteria should be changed”, please give further details in the space provided of how you believe the criteria should be changed

FSM eligibility should be designed to target children living in poverty. Given that FSM eligibility is often used as a passport to other entitlements, such as uniform grants, this provides an even greater incentive to ensuring children in poverty are correctly targeted in the eligibility criteria.

As NICCY's evidence highlights, the current FSM criteria only covers 59% of children living in poverty, with 66% of those who are eligible not living in poverty. This clearly demonstrates that the current eligibility criteria is not fit for purpose.

Barnardo's NI recommends that the requirement for families to be in receipt of social security should be removed as a criteria for FSM, and eligibility should be based on income levels, equivalised by family size.

Consultation Question 2

If a form of universal FSM provision were to be introduced in Northern Ireland, how strongly do you agree or disagree that this should prioritise younger pupils in a similar way to the rest of the UK?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Consultation Question 3

In light of the Department's challenging budget position, how strongly do you agree or disagree that it should be a priority for the Department to increase the number of children that are able to access free school meals?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Consultation Question 4

If additional funding is made available to give more children free school meals, please indicate how you would prefer that it should be used?

- all be used to allow more low-income families to receive free school meals
- all be used to provide a universal free school meal to all pupils in certain younger years at school like the rest of the UK
- be split between allowing some more low-income families to receive free school meals and offering a universal free school meal to all pupils in certain year groups at school

Consultation Question 5

If it were decided that the only change would be to rollout a form of universal FSM, which of the following groups of pupils would be your preference to receive a universal FSM?

- Universal FSM for full-time pupils from nursery to P3
- Universal FSM for full-time pupils from nursery to P7
- Universal FSM for full-time pupils in nursery to Yr14
- Other

Consultation Question 6

If it were decided that the Department should rollout a form of universal FSM provision AND it should also enable more low-income pupils from all school years to be entitled to FSM, which of the following is your preferred option for who should be offered a universal FSM?

- Universal FSM for full-time pupils from nursery to P3
- Universal FSM for full-time pupils from nursery to P7
- Other (please specify)

There is strong evidence of the benefit of providing FSM on a universal basis, for a range of reasons, including as an early intervention and prevention measure, to improve children's health and educational outcomes in the short and longer term, building healthy eating habits, and overcoming the stigma often associated with FSM.

Barnardo's NI recommends that FSM should be provided on a universal basis to children of all ages. However, we are also cognisant of the restricted financial climate government departments are operating within, and therefore universal provision may not be immediately possible. Therefore, Barnardo's NI supports the approach whereby FSM eligibility is reviewed and targeted towards children in poverty, and that universal provision should be targeted towards younger children to begin, and progressively expanding to older age groups over time as budget allows.