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Thousands of children in poverty in every North West area can't get free school meals – calls to overhaul eligibility rules

Every North West local authority has at least 1,500 school-age children in poverty who are not eligible for free school meals because the qualifying criteria is so restrictive, new analysis shows (see local authority breakdown below).

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and Greater Manchester Poverty Action (GMPA), authors of the new research, are urging local leaders to do what they can to ensure more kids get a free lunch but say the responsibility ultimately lies with the UK government to expand provision of free school meals across the country to tackle classroom hunger.

Infants are guaranteed a free school meal in England but children in Year 3 and above must be in households on universal credit with an income below £7,400 per year (before benefits and after tax) to qualify. This threshold has not changed since 2018, despite increasing inflation. It means 100,000 (one in four) school-age children in poverty across the North West can't claim free meals – at a time when one in three children in the region are below the poverty line and the cost of living crisis continues to bite.

The analysis highlights the stark inadequacy of the current free school system for families, with the number of school-age children who are poor but ineligible for free lunches ranging from 1,500 in Halton to 15,000 in Lancashire.

Local Authority	Children in poverty not eligible for free school meals
Blackburn with Darwen	3,000
Blackpool	2,000
Bolton	5,500
Bury	3,000
Cheshire East	3,500
Cheshire West and Chester	3,500

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Greater Manchester Poverty Action (GMPA) is a recognised leader on poverty in the UK and exists to end poverty in Greater Manchester and beyond.

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Cumbria	4,500
Halton	1,500
Knowsley	2,000
Lancashire	15,000
Liverpool	6,500
Manchester	10,500
Oldham	5,000
Rochdale	4,000
Salford	4,000
Sefton	3,000
St. Helens	2,000
Stockport	3,000
Tameside	3,500
Trafford	3,500
Warrington	2,000
Wigan	4,000
Wirral	3,500
North West	100,000

Child Poverty Action Group’s head of education policy Kate Anstey said:

“Seeing the statistics at local level brings this issue home. Children in every corner of the North West are sitting in classrooms too hungry to concentrate and learn because they don’t qualify for a free school meal. Too many children are being let down by the Government’s cruel free school meals cut-off threshold – and these numbers should act as a wake-up call. The Government must bring in universal free school meals to ensure every child has the food they need and struggling families get breathing space from high costs. Means-testing children at lunchtime should be a thing of the past.”



Greater Manchester Poverty Action's CEO Graham Whitham said:

"Child poverty rates have been rising in the North West for a number of years, and families across the region have been hit hard by soaring living costs. At a time when every penny counts, it cannot be right that 100,000 North West kids in poverty can't claim free school meals. Low-income families are under immense financial pressure at the moment and introducing universal free school meals would mean they have that bit extra to spend on other bills and household essentials. It would also improve their children's nutrition, ultimately helping them to learn, engage and thrive."

Government action on free school meals in England lags far behind other UK nations. In Scotland and Wales universal provision is being rolled out across primary schools and in Northern Ireland the eligibility threshold is considerably higher than in England (eligibility is set at £14,000 in Northern Ireland). Emergency funding provided by the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, also means all state primary school children in London will receive free school meals until the end of the 2024/25 academic school year.

The new analysis is published in a today in a report from CPAG and GMPA which highlights examples of local action being taken in the North West to increase access to free school meals, encouraging local leaders to do what they can but also to join national calls for expansion of entitlement to free school lunch.

The report outlines existing research which shows children's health, attainment and even school attendance is improved when free school meals are universal. Free lunch for every child would also be a significant step towards ensuring the UK meets its international human rights obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (which states that children have the right to food, clothing and a safe space to live and that the government should help families and children who cannot afford this) and under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (which guarantees the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger and identifies positive obligations on States to fulfil the right to adequate food when individuals are unable to do so themselves.

Ends.



Notes to editors:

Today's report on free school meals in the North West is [here](#).

Transitional protection:

Since 1 April 2018, transitional protections have been in place which will continue during the roll out of Universal Credit. This has meant that pupils eligible for free school meals on or after 1 April 2018 retain their free school meals eligibility even if their circumstances change. If a child is eligible for free school meals, they'll remain eligible until they finish the phase of schooling (primary or secondary) they're in on 31 March 2025.

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