FixOurFood: Free School Meal Auto-Enrolment Action-Oriented Project

RESEARCH BRIEF 2

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FREE SCHOOL MEAL (FSM) AUTO-ENROLMENT

- FSM auto-enrolment registers eligible families to receive FSMs using benefits data, unless families opt out.
- FixOurFood supports the set-up of FSM auto-enrolment processes within local authorities (LA) in England and evaluate implementation and impact.
- This is being achieved by (1) providing practical implementation guidance and facilitation support on how to implement FSM auto-enrolment; (2) conducting interviews and documentary analysis with LA teams, national stakeholders, schools and parents; and (3) analysis of routine administration data alongside cost-benefits.

"WE PUT A LOT OF OUR PUPIL PREMIUM RESOURCE INTO THE WIDER STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT... SUPPORT MECHANISMS THAT WE'RE ABLE TO NOW FUND, FOR EXAMPLE, MENTORING" -- Yorkshire School

IN OUR LAST BRIEF...

- FSM auto-enrolment in the 1st 5 LAs led to an additional 2,814 FSM registrations, equating to an extra yearly £4.7m in pupil premium funding to schools, an additional half a million free school meals, and saving the poorest families £1.3 million.
- Local authorities are keen to support processes, but face several barriers including onerous governance and administration, legal confusion and difficulty accessing data.

"Any kind of saving is a good saving... So I would say it's a Godsend really" -- Parent

WE ARE NOW SUPPORTING...

66 LAs

If all of them set up auto-enrolment - based on data from our first 5 areas - this scales up ANNUALLY to approx.

£62M additional school **INCOME**

37K additional school **REGISTRATIONS**

7M additional **FSM**

£18M SAVINGS to the poorest **FAMILIES**

"It feels very much like we are trying to do something underhand when all we are trying to do is support children access a benefit to which they are legitimately entitled, there really shouldn't be this many obstacles should there? -- LA

A CASE STUDY OF IMPLEMENTATION BARRIERS

One of the FixOurFood's local authorities in the North West of England has explained how they invested considerable resources over 15 months to set up FSM auto-enrolment processes. They collaborated with the Department for Work and Pensions. They reported being signposted (and asked to complete) numerous forms and checklists during this period, including data re-use forms, the Welfare Support File and the Eligibility Checking System. This complex and complicated process of justifying data permissions and understanding how to merge data files is still holding things up. Now, 15 months on, time is running out to implement the FSM auto-enrolment process.

IMPACT ON SCHOOLS AND PARENTS

ACCEPTABILITY OF FSM AUTO-ENROLMENT

Provisional interview data has already found:

- FSM auto-enrolment provides one less thing for families to worry about who are under a lot of stress
- Parents save a lot money, especially those with multiple eligible children
- Some parents struggle academically and find filling forms difficult
- Some parents lack awareness of what benefits are available to them alongside the application process
- Auto-enrolment removes embarrassment from parents having to admit they need support financially and in completing forms

BENEFITS TO SCHOOLS

- Increases pupil premium to help fund initiatives that support children
- Mitigates under-registration of FSMs for children receiving UIFSM/UFSM
- Reduces administrative time in schools that offer form-filling support
- Helps schools know which students require additional support

BENEFITS OF A CENTRAL GOVT ADMINISTRATION OF AUTO-ENROLMENT

1. **Overcomes barriers** due to differences in LA governance (e.g. between County and District councils)
2. **Eradicates risk of a postcode lottery** arising depending on which LA adopts which practises
3. Leads to a **more efficient welfare state**, improving people's living standards
4. **Low-cost policy** of supporting low-income families, and particularly helping kids to get a good meal

INTERIM RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Set a timeline & process for the introduction of a **national auto-enrolment system by 2025**, that removes the need for additional administration
2. **Collaborative working** across local government agencies to agree how benefits data can be accessed & used for the introduction of respective Local Authority 'opt-out auto-award' FSM registration mechanisms
3. **Commission an FSM registration rates dataset** so that a current assessment of under registration rates at individual Local Authority level can be reviewed