

This discussion paper has been written by officials of the Welsh Government. Ministers have not had an opportunity to comment on the contents. Exemplifications of changes are provided simply to inform discussion by DSG members. They are not Welsh Government proposals or statements of Government policy for or against changes.

Free school meals indicator

Summary

1. Eligible for Free school meals (eFSM) data is used as a proxy for deprivation within the settlement to distribute funding across local authorities.
2. Despite the eFSM data currently being frozen within the settlement, this paper is a discussion piece to assess how DSG would like us to approach the data for 2021 when it becomes available.

Views sought

3. DSG are asked to discuss whether those transitionally protected should be included in the eligible for free school meals data.

Related papers

Distribution Sub-Group (2020) Paper 16 – Assessing the Impact of Universal Credit on the 2020 PLASC FSM data;

Distribution Sub-Group (2019) Paper 16 – Assessing the impact of universal credit on the PLASC FSM data;

Distribution Sub-Group (2019) Paper 15 – Updating the Settlement with 2019 PLASC data;

Distribution Sub-Group (2018) Paper 23 – Assessing the impact of universal credit on the PLASC FSM data.

Background

4. The Settlement indicators relating to pupil numbers and free school meal eligibility are updated on an annual basis using the latest Pupil Level Annual School Census. The data is a snapshot at January of the academic year.
5. The PLASC is the most accurate and robust source of pupil-level data and using this as a proxy for need to spend on education services ensures that the Settlement remains reactive to real movements in the number of pupils requiring education.
6. Eligibility for Free School Meals (eFSM) is used as a deprivation proxy for the additional need to spend on teaching and other services in the local government settlement, but is not used as a proxy for the need to spend on school meals.
7. Until 31 March 2019, all Universal Credit claimants were eligible to claim free school meals. However, the Welsh Government introduced the net annualised

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earnings threshold of £7,400 for Universal Credit claimants wishing to claim free school meals for their children with effect from 1 April 2019.

8. At the same time, a programme of transitional protection was introduced for families. Transitional protection ensures that the changes to the free school meals eligibility criteria cause the minimum possible amount of disruption.
9. Pupils eFSM when the criteria changed on 1 April 2019, or any new claimants who gain free school meals during the rollout of Universal Credit (currently scheduled to complete in December 2023), will be protected against losing free school meals whilst Universal Credit is rolled out across Wales, until the end of their phase of education (i.e. Primary or Secondary), even if their eligibility changes.
10. From the 2020 PLASC, it was possible to split out those still eFSM and those transitionally protected. As no formal validation was undertaken on the data in 2020 it was not presented to the group.
11. This paper is to be used as a discussion paper to obtain DSGs views on the approach to the data for 2022/23 settlement.

Discussion

12. Below are a series of questions for the group to consider to stimulate the discussion:
 - a) Would the group like us to consider the 2021 eFSM data to potentially unfreeze the dataset?
 - b) Does the number of pupils that are transitionally protected (but no longer eFSM) further reflect the levels of deprivation in an authority?
 - c) If so should these figures be combined with those pupils eligible for free school meals?
 - d) Would DSG prefer that the number of pupils transitionally protected be included in the PLASC validation document, which is sent to Chief Financial Officers by Knowledge and Analytical Service (KAS), to ensure the data is accurate before further analysis is completed?

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