

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Education and Children's Services
DATE	2 July 2024
EXEMPT	No
CONFIDENTIAL	No
REPORT TITLE	Free School Meals Annual Update
REPORT NUMBER	F&C/24/180
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR	Eleanor Sheppard
CHIEF OFFICER	Shona Milne
REPORT AUTHOR	Paul Tytler
TERMS OF REFERENCE	1.1.1

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 This report presents the annual update on Free School Meals (FSM).

2. RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee:-

- 2.1 Notes the progress in Free School Meal provision and actions to continue increasing uptake;
- 2.2 Instruct the Chief Officer, Corporate Landlord to progress the implementation of the school meals pre-order app for all Secondary Schools in the city; and
- 2.3 Instruct the Chief Officer, Corporate Landlord to report on the impact of the pre-order app in the next annual update report on Free School Meals.

3. CURRENT SITUATION

- 3.1 The trend data for primary and secondary schools is available in Appendix 1.
- 3.2 The trend data shows that the universal entitlement to free school meals for those in Primary 1 – 5 has triggered a sharp rise in the number of primary children registered. The slight dip in the percentage of eligible primary children (from 77.2% in 2022/23 to 77.1% in 2023/24), is due to the changes in the primary demographic across primary 6 and 7. 7,632 free school meals were taken by pupils in P1-5 on census day, this is the highest number recorded in the city.
- 3.3.1 Registrations for primary pupils continues to be above the national average, this is now a three year trend. This suggests that our arrangements to encourage registrations have been successful. Registrations are likely to increase further over the next year as children in P6 and P7 in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment will qualify from February 2025. Although the exact

number of children who will become eligible is hard to determine, it is thought to be around 1000.

- 3.3.2 The proportion of all Primary Pupils present on the survey day taking lunches, either free or paid for, has risen from 65.4% in 2023 to 66.4% in 2024. At Secondary level, there is a slightly higher year-on-year increase, with 37.6% of those present taking free or paid for lunches in 2024, in contrast to 35.1% in 2023. Both of these outcomes are ahead of those in 2022 and represent a consecutive three year improvement trend. In 2022, the comparative figures were 62.3% and 34.1% respectively.
- 3.4 Over the last 5 years the number of young people of secondary school age registered for free school meals has risen steadily, this rising trend is likely to be partially due to amended registration arrangements and changes in family circumstances. The percentage of young people of secondary school age who are registered for free school meals is now, for the first time, in keeping with the national average suggesting that arrangements for encouraging registration have worked well. 1983 secondary pupils are now registered for free school meals, this is nearly double the number registered in 2018/19.
- 3.5 After an increase in secondary uptake over 2022/23, the number of young people taking up their free school meal on survey day has fallen slightly. The dip in Secondary registration is thought to be partially attributable to a greater number of pupils in S4-6 registered and present (whom are known to be less inclined to take FSM based meals than S1-3 pupils).
- 3.6 Registration levels across primary and secondary schools are now both more closely aligned with national outcomes which, given what is understood of the relative levels of child poverty in the City, indicates that the reach of FSM provision is being extended and now encompasses a greater majority of pupils who would be eligible for FSM.
- 3.7 Direct year-on-year comparisons around FSM uptake have a natural variance taking differing pupil profiles and attendance levels on the survey day into account. Based on the survey sizes, this statistical variance might account for +/- 2-3 percentage points between years so the 3-year averages for Secondary are probably more useful to reflect on.
- 3.8 Having reviewed the data, it was clear that more work needed to be undertaken to understand low secondary uptake. In order to better understand the challenges in Secondary Schools with uptakes being lower than we would wish, a survey has been undertaken with form groups of pupils at each secondary school to gather information directly from our young people on why they are choosing to eat elsewhere.
 - 3.8.1 There were 1261 responses received and of those, 304 (24%) identified that they did not have enough time to queue for food in the canteen as the biggest reason for them choosing to either bring their own food or to eat elsewhere.
 - 3.8.2 We asked our young people if they would be more likely to get their food from the school canteen if they could pre-order food on a mobile phone app for easy

collection. Of the 1261 responses received, 313 (25%) said Yes that they definitely would, with 374 (30%) saying Yes that they maybe would, and a further 197 (16%) saying they did not know. 219 (17%) said No, they didn't think so and only 158 (12%) saying No, they definitely wouldn't. This gives the Catering Service confidence that by introducing such an app, that it would have a positive impact on meal uptakes in Secondary Schools, both free and paid moving forward.

- 3.8.3 A pre-order app is available as a bolt-on module for the ParentPay system referenced in 3.10 below. A quotation was sought from ParentPay for the implementation of this module in all 11 Secondary Schools, the cost totalling £13,915.

Changes made over the last year

- 3.9 The Scottish Government announced on 16 May 2024 the [School Meal Debt Fund 2024/25](#). Discussions are underway about making a claim for funding to clear the current level of debt, which as of 1st April 2024 was £27,596.92.
- 3.10 The Council has implemented ParentPay, a cashless catering and kitchen management system across our school estate. This will help improve data on uptake and one early benefit of the new system that has influenced debt level positively is that a new debt management process is implemented directly through the system. This gives key services (Schools and Catering) ownership of stages of the process and has resulted in a far lower debt value than was held within the old Accord Card system. Further benefits are:
- **Convenience:** Parents can pay for school-related costs, like meals, trips, and uniforms, from their own home, whenever they want.
 - **Security:** ParentPay removes the need for children to bring cash to school, lowering the chance of loss or theft and anonymity for those in receipt of Free School Meals via the benefits route.
 - **Transparency:** Parents can see their payment history and account balance, helping them to track their spending and plan their budget.
 - **Alternative payment options:** For customers who cannot make online payments, the PayPoint service lets them pay in local shops.
 - **Real-time access to data:** The system provides real-time data on meal choice, uptake, and income, which was not available with the previous system. This data is very useful for future meal planning and waste reduction.
 - **Improved reporting:** The real-time data allows for more prompt and precise reporting to Council Committees.
 - **Enhanced management of pupil allergens:** A new level of resilience is in place for managing pupil allergens, protecting young people from harm.

These benefits contribute to a more efficient, secure, and data-driven catering management system for the Council.

3.11.1 The FSM/School Clothing Grant applications have now been merged into one, which allows parents to quickly determine if they will be eligible based on initial questions. Those identified to be eligible and not claiming their entitlements are contacted to encourage registration.

3.11.2 We continue to allow parents to be auto-awarded FSM/School Clothing Grants through Housing Benefit/Council Tax Reduction claims unless they opt out. Each school has been provided with a list of pupils who the local authority believes are automatically entitled to free school meals. Initially, these families will not be auto-awarded the benefit as we require them to apply and provide information about their bank, so that School Clothing Grant payments can be made. Many families in poverty, often change between banks and we need to be sure that their account details are valid so that any payment can be accessed by the family.

3.11.3 From 1st June 2024, any family that is on the auto-award list, but has not applied, will be auto-awarded Free School meals only. A communication will be sent to the family notifying them of the auto-award. This will include details of any entitlement to School Clothing Grant with an invitation to apply where necessary.

3.11.4 Design work is underway for the food pod at St Machar Academy. This project will now link with wider developments in the playground, with installation of the food pod planned for the Easter holiday in 2024.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 There are no new financial implications arising from this report. The cost of the app will be met from existing resources.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 There are no new legal implications arising from this report.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There are no environmental implications arising from this report.

7. RISK

Category	Risks	Primary Controls/Control Actions to achieve Target Risk Level	*Target Risk Level (L, M or H) *taking into account controls/control actions	*Does Target Risk Level Match Appetite Set?
Strategic Risk	n/a	n/a	L	Yes

Compliance	n/a	n/a	L	Yes
Operational	There is a risk that families will experience food poverty	We will continue to monitor effectiveness of systems and processes to maximise registrations and uptake of free school meals; improved debt management and debt eradication.	L	Yes
Financial	There is a risk of reduced income due to fewer school meals being paid for	Improved debt management and Scottish Government Grant funding and monitoring of impact on budgets	L	Yes
Reputational	n/a	n/a	L	Yes
Environment / Climate	n/a	n/a	L	Yes

8. OUTCOMES

<u>Council Delivery Plan 2024</u>	
Impact of Report	
Aberdeen City Council Policy Statement <u>Working in Partnership for Aberdeen</u>	<p>The proposals within this report support the delivery of the following aspects of the policy statement:-</p> <p>As a Council, it is a key priority that we invest in our children's futures, to ensure that they achieve positive destinations and are given the best opportunities in life</p> <p>Caring for young people - Review the cost of the school day, to make sure no child is missing out on opportunities because of their financial situation</p>
<u>Local Outcome Improvement Plan</u>	
Prosperous Economy Stretch Outcomes	The proposals within this report support the delivery of LOIP Stretch Outcome 1 – 20% reduction in the percentage of people who report they have been worried they would not have enough food to eat and/ or not be able to heat their home by 2026.
Prosperous People Stretch Outcomes	The proposals within this report support the delivery of all Children & Young People Stretch Outcomes 5. By meeting the health and emotional wellbeing needs of our care experienced children and young people they will have the same levels of attainment

	in education and positive destinations as their peers by 2026.
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9. IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Assessment	Outcome
Integrated Impact Assessment	No assessment required. I confirm this has been discussed and agreed with the Chief Officer on 28 May 2024.
Data Protection Impact Assessment	Not required
Other	n/a

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

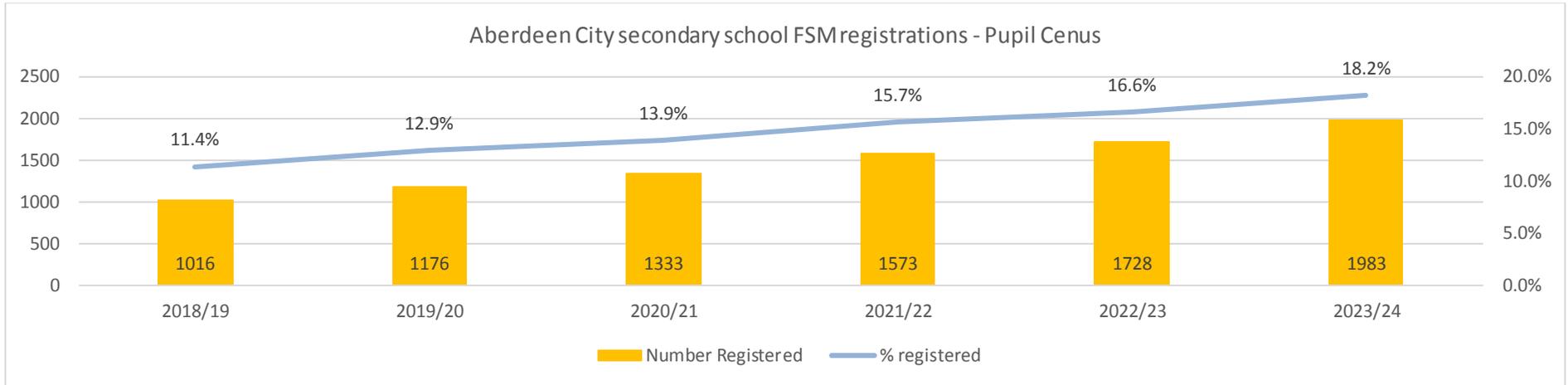
10.1 [Free School Meals Annual Update CUS/23/172](#)

11. APPENDICES

11.1 Appendix 1 – Free School Meals uptake data

12. REPORT AUTHOR CONTACT DETAILS

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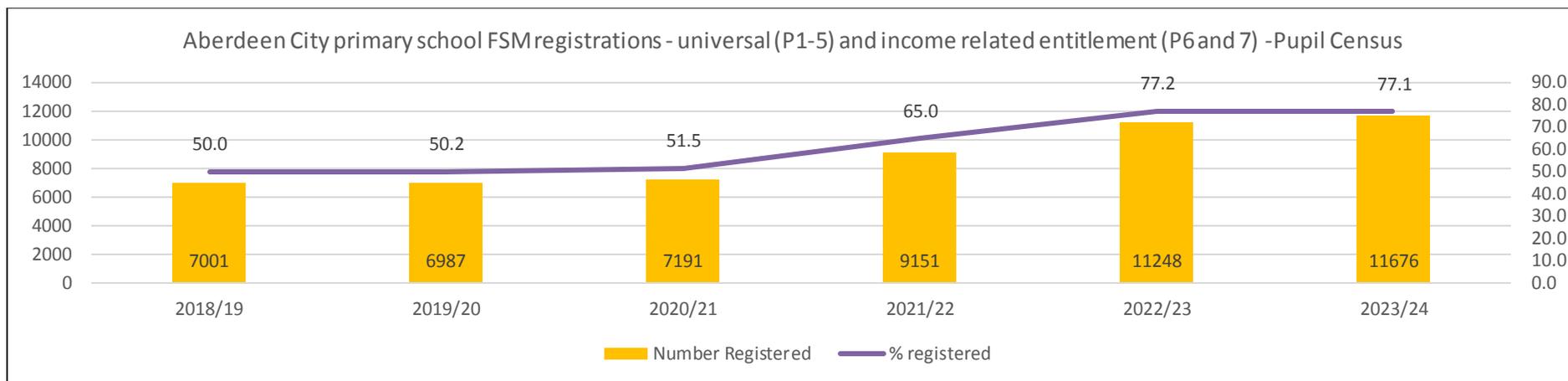


Secondary	Year	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Aberdeen Secondary Level	Number Registered	1016	1176	1333	1573	1728	1983
Aberdeen Secondary Level	% registered	11.4%	12.9%	13.9%	15.7%	16.6%	18.2%
Scotland Secondary Level	% Scotland registered	14.0%	15.3%	17.0%	17.6%	17.8%	18.3%

What does this data tell us?

Over the last 5 years the number of young people of secondary school age registered for free school meals has risen steadily, this rising trend is likely to be partially due to amended local registration arrangements and changes in family circumstances.

The percentage of young people of secondary school age who are registered for free school meals is now, for the first time, in keeping with the national average. 1983 secondary pupils are registered for free school meals, this is nearly double the number registered in 2018/19.

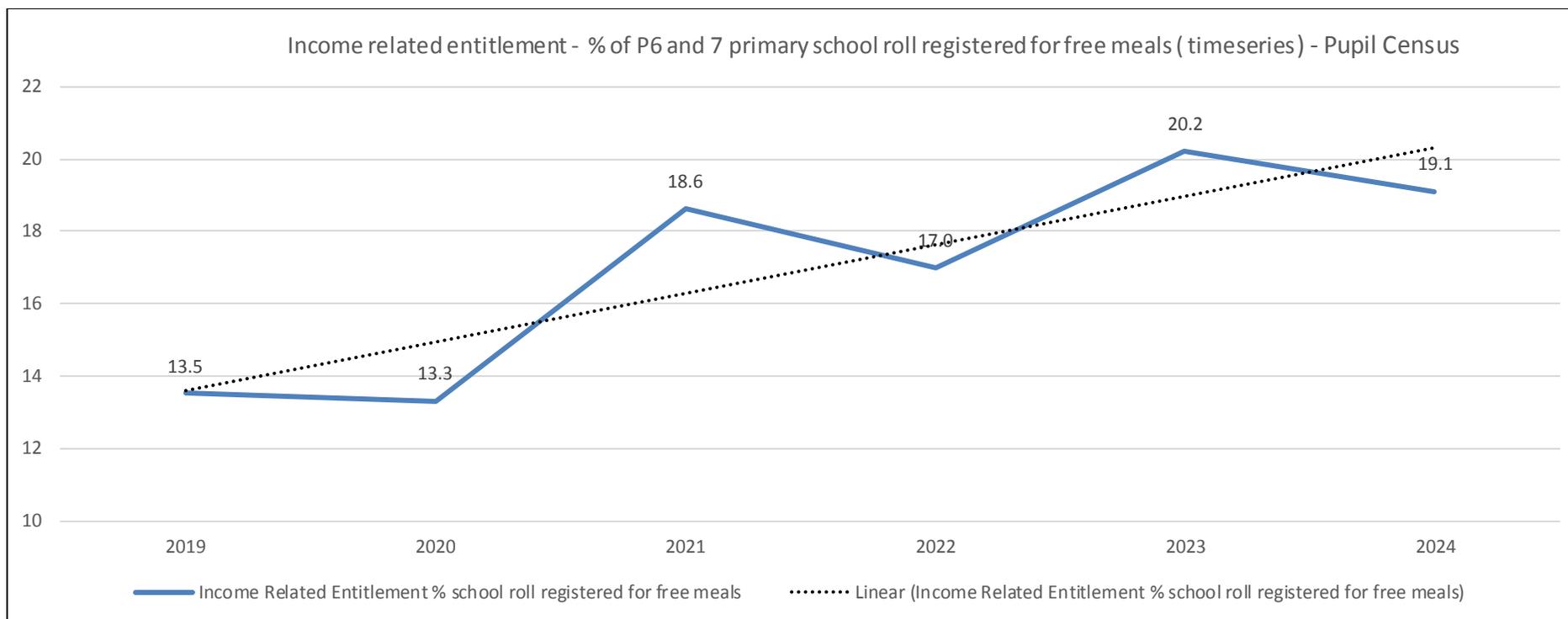


	Year	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Aberdeen Primary Level	Number Registered	7001	6987	7191	9151	11248	11676
Aberdeen Primary Level	% registered	50.0%	50.2%	51.5%	65.0%	77.2%	77.1%
Scotland Primary Level	% Scotland registered	52.7%	53.2%	54.1%	64.9%	76.3%	76.4%

What does this data tell us?

The universal entitlement to free school meals for those in Primary 1 – 5 has triggered a sharp rise in the number of primary children registered. This is likely to increase slightly over the next year as children in P6 and P7 in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment will qualify from February 2025. Although the exact number of children thought likely to be eligible from February 2025 is hard to determine, it is thought that around 1000 further children will become eligible.

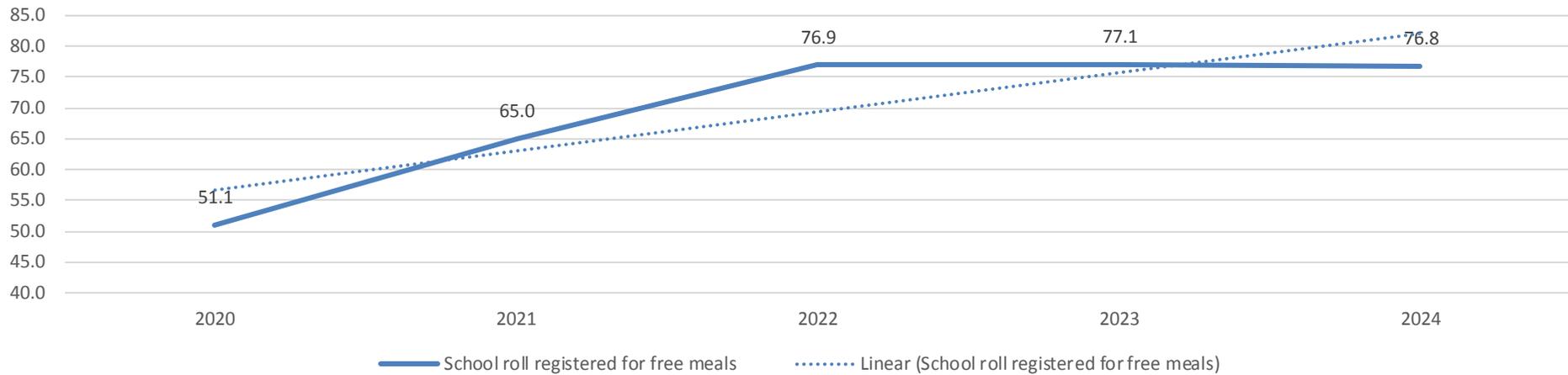
The slight dip in the percentage eligible (from 77.2% in 2022/23 to 77.1% in 2023/24, is thought most likely due to the changes in the primary demographic.



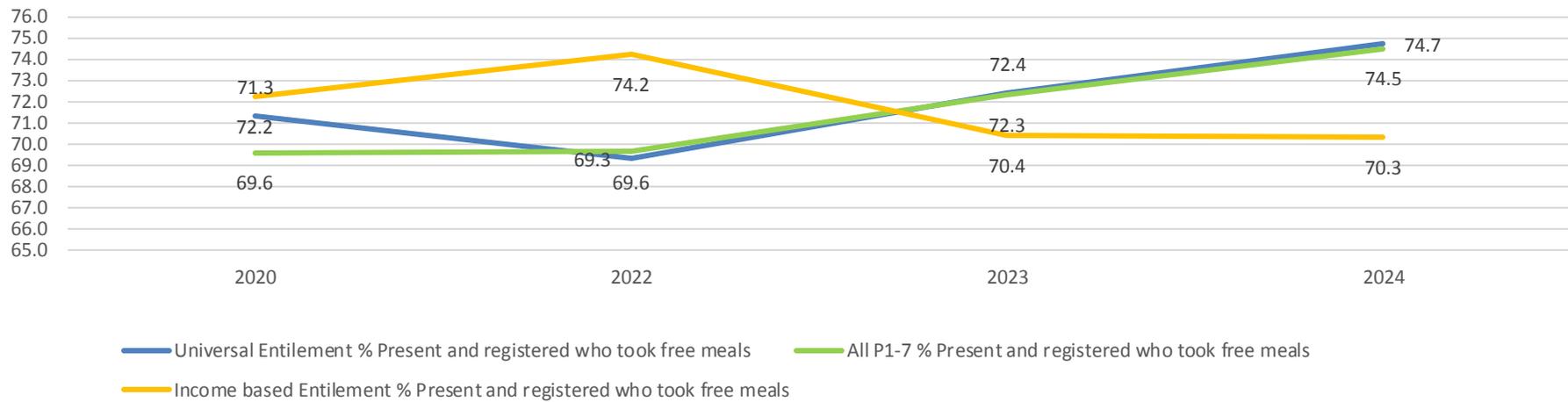
What does this data tell us?

The dip of 1% point from 2023 to 2024 is most likely as a result of increasing numbers of children in schools who are not entitled to claim free school meals. Longer term data shows that there is a rising trend in registrations.

Universal and Income related Entitlement - % of all primary school roll registered for free meals (timeseries) - Healthy Living Survey



% uptake of Primary school free meals by category of entitlement and all P1-7 (pupils registered and present) - Healthy Living Survey

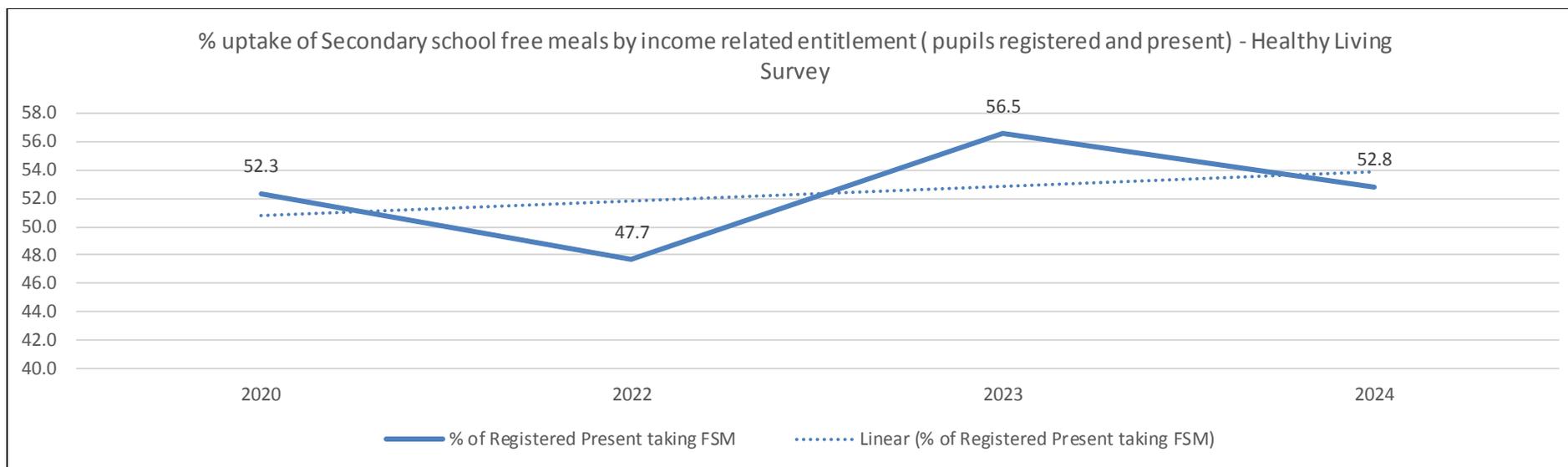


Primary Schools - Free School Meal Provision Aberdeen City – Healthy Living Survey

Year	Universal Provision Range	Universal Provision		Deprivation related Provision across Primary 6 and 7			All Primary (P1-P7)		
		School roll registered for free meals	% Present and registered who took free meals	% School roll registered for free meals	Number of free meals taken	% Present and registered who took free meals	School roll registered for free meals	Number of free meals taken	% Present and registered who took free meals
2024	P1-5	100.0	74.7	19.1	515	70.3	76.8	8147	74.5
2023	P1-5	100.0	72.4	20.2	554	70.4	77.1	7875	72.3
2022	P1-5	100.0	69.3	17.0	468	74.2	76.9	7032	69.6

What does this data tell us?

7,632 free school meals were taken by pupils in P1-5 on survey day, this is the highest number recorded. The data shows an overall improving picture in terms of take up, although the uptake among P6 & 7 is impacted by the changing demographics across our school populations.



Secondary Schools - Free School Meal Provision Aberdeen City – Healthy Living Survey		
Year	Deprivation related Provision	
	% School roll registered for free meals	% Present and registered who took free meals
2024	15.6%	52.8%
2023	17.7%	56.5%
2022	15.9%	47.7%
What does this data tell us?		

The dip in Secondary registration is thought to be partially attributable to a greater number of pupils in S4-6 registered and present (whom are known to be less inclined to take FSM based meals than S1-3 pupils). In addition, this is thought partially attributable to changes secondary school demographics.

School Meals Served

Year	Primary Pupils Universal Provision	Primary Pupils Income Related Registered	Total Primary Pupils Registered	Secondary Pupils Registered	Special School Pupils Registered	Totals
2018	6225	895	7120	1016	33	8169
2019	6151	1056	7207	1176	66	8449
2020	6075	1046	7121	1333	67	8521
2021	8034	1117	9151	1573	76	10800
2022	10388	860	11248	1728	140	13116
2023	10777	899	11676	1933	130	13739

What does this data tell us?

This data is from the Council's facilities management team and reflects the actual meals provided on one day, which shows an overall improving trend in terms of uptake.

