

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Education and Children's Services
DATE	24 June 2025
EXEMPT	No
CONFIDENTIAL	No
REPORT TITLE	Free School Meals Annual Update
REPORT NUMBER	F&C/25/092
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR	Eleanor Sheppard
CHIEF OFFICER	Stephen Booth and Shona Milne
REPORT AUTHOR	Andy Campbell
TERMS OF REFERENCE	1.1.1

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

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

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Committee:-

- 2.1 Notes the progress in Free School Meal provision and actions to continue increasing uptakes;
- 2.2 Notes the Scottish Government's decision to stop data collection via the annual Healthy Living Survey, and the move to collecting data on school meal uptakes and free school meals registrations via the Local Financial Return; and
- 2.3 Notes the successful implementation of the Pre-order app in Secondary Schools and the positive impact it has had on both customer numbers and revenue.

3. CURRENT SITUATION

- 3.1 The trend data for primary and secondary schools FSM registrations is available in **Appendix 1**.
- 3.2 On 03 February 2025, the Scottish Government's Learning Directorate wrote to all Scottish Local Authority Directors of Education to consult on their proposal to replace the annual Healthy Living Survey as the main source for school meal uptake statistics, with data from the [Local Financial Return](#) (LFR).
- 3.3 On 12 February 2025, the Scottish Government's Learning Directorate again wrote to all Scottish Local Authority Directors of Education, to advise them of the outcome of that consultation, this being that after considering the responses to the consultation and their assessment of their own use of school meal uptake statistics, they had decided to move to producing statistics based on data from the LFR.

- 3.4 The result of this is that the Healthy Living Survey was not undertaken in February 2025, meaning that no updates on a number of the metrics which historically form part of this report are able to be provided in this annual update report.
- 3.5 Data from the Pupil Census and Supplementary Statistics was, however, published on 25 March 2025. This data, as well as internal service data has been used to provide some statistical updates for Committee's information.
- 3.6 The trend data shows that universal entitlement to free school meals for those in Primary 1 – 5 had triggered a sharp rise in the number of primary children registered. There has been a slight dip in the percentage of eligible primary children (from 77.1% in 2023/24 to 76.7% in 2024/25), which is due to changes in the primary demographic across primary 6 and 7.
- 3.7 Registrations for primary pupils continues to be above the national average, which is now a four year trend. This suggests that our arrangements to encourage registrations continue to be successful.
- 3.8 Registrations are likely to increase further over the next year as children in P6 and P7 in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment (SCP) now qualify for free school meals. Eligibility for this cohort commenced from February 2025, however, because no data sharing agreement was in place between Local Authorities and Social Security Scotland, auto enrolment was not possible. A change to our application process for free school meals was implemented in April 2025, with parents and carers asked to indicate SCP eligibility, whereafter a verification process is undertaken. Once eligibility has been confirmed, free school meals eligibility is applied to the pupil's record in Seemis. The data from registrations for this cohort will be included in future years reports.
- 3.9 Because no Healthy Living Survey was undertaken in February 2025, it is not possible to provide data on either Primary or Secondary pupils taking lunches, either free or paid for on survey day, as has historically been reported in this annual update report. However, for Committee's assurance, internal data displayed in Table 1 below shows that the number of Primary School Meals served per financial year continues to increase, with an additional 65162 meals served in 2024/25 as compared to 2023/24.

Year	Primary School Meals Served
2022-23	1,526,088
2023-24	2,015,903
2024-25	2,081,065

Table 1

Table 2 below provides a further breakdown of the meals served per quarter, as reported as part of the Performance Report to Communities, Housing & Public Protection Committee on 27 May 2025.

Period	2023-24	2024-25	Difference
Q1	576576	588741	12165
Q2	314384	338994	24610
Q3	523174	536217	13043
Q4	601769	617113	15344
Total	2015903	2081065	65162

Table 2

- 3.10 After a 5 year rising trend in the number of young people of secondary school age registered for free school meals, we have seen a slight dip in the percentage of eligible secondary children (from 18.2% in 2023/24 to 15.5% in 2024/25). 1735 secondary pupils are now registered for free school meals, which is the second highest number of pupils registered in the last 5 years. The dip in registrations is consistent with the general picture of improvements in various poverty indicators. Table 3 below shows the reduction in the percentage of Children Under 16 living in relative poverty In Aberdeen City, as well as the reduction in the percentage nationally.

	Percentage of children 2020	Percentage of children 2021	Percentage of children 2022	Percentage of children 2023	Percentage of children 2024	Year-on-year percentage change
Aberdeen City	15.9%	13.9%	13.5%	14.5%	12.3%	-2.2%
Scotland	19.5%	16.8%	16.9%	17.8%	16.3%	-1.5%

Table 3

(Source: [Children in low income families: local area statistics 2014 to 2024 - GOV.UK](#))

Changes made over the last year to encourage increasing meal uptakes

- 3.11 The Scottish Government announced the [School Meal Debt Fund 2024/25](#) on 16 May 2024. Aberdeen City Council made a successful application to the fund, being awarded £411,977.90 in additional grant funding to address debt for financial year 2023/24 up to and including 31 March 2024, and also debt which had been previously written off by the Council in financial years 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23.
- 3.12 In March 2025, the Catering team undertook an exercise on our ParentPay cashless catering system, to credit the accounts which had been in debt on 31 March 2024. A total of 700 accounts were cleared of debt, with the total value of debt cleared being £21,882.17.
- 3.13 Free School Meals and School Clothing Grant applications have been merged into one application. This 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.

- 3.14 We continue to allow parents to be auto-awarded Free School Meals/School Clothing Grants through Housing Benefit/Council Tax Reduction claims unless they opt out. Each school is provided with a list of pupils who the local authority believes are automatically entitled to free school meals. Initially, these families are not 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 regularly 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.
- 3.15 From 1st June 2024, any family who is on the auto-award list, but has not applied, has been auto-awarded Free School meals only. A communication is sent to the family notifying them of the auto-award. This includes details of any entitlement to School Clothing Grant with an invitation to apply where necessary. The data will also be used to identify those families who qualify for school meal vouchers during holiday periods.
- 3.16 It has long been acknowledged that there are particular challenges around uptakes of school meals in our Secondary Schools. At its meeting on 02 July 2024, this Committee instructed the Chief Officer, Corporate Landlord to progress the implementation of the school meals pre-order app for all Secondary Schools in the city, with the service seeing this as an initiative which might help to combat these challenges. The app was implemented on a phased approach with schools going live as follows:
- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| 11 September 2024 | Cults Academy
Northfield Academy
Oldmachar Academy |
| 16 September 2024 | Dyce Academy
Lochside Academy
St Machar Academy |
| 24 September 2024 | Bridge of Don Academy
Harlaw Academy
Hazlehead Academy |
| 30 September 2024 | Aberdeen Grammar School
Bucksburn Academy |
- 3.17 Committee also instructed the Chief Officer, Corporate Landlord to report on the impact of the pre-order app. The app has been an immediate success. Between September 2024 and April 2025, there has been an average monthly increase of 10,037 pupil customer transactions across the Secondary School estate which has resulted in an average monthly increase of £22,759 in revenue (which includes the value of free school meals customer transactions). Data can be seen in **Appendix 2**.
- 3.18 Scottish Government have extended FSM eligibility for P6/7 young people who are eligible for the Scottish Child Payment (SCP) from February 2025. Because

no data sharing agreement between Social Security Scotland and Local Authorities was in place at the time of the extension, an additional interim application and verification process was required to be developed and implemented which delayed the go live date for eligible Aberdeen City pupils to 14 April 2025.

- 3.19 The 'Social Security Information-sharing (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2025' were unanimously approved by Scottish Parliament on Wednesday 30 April 2025. The legal framework came into effect on 19 May 2025. The regulations allow the sharing of data between Social Security Scotland and all 32 local authorities on families eligible for the Scottish Child Payment. This will enable the incorporation of data into exercises to identify pupils who may be eligible for free school meals, allowing auto-enrolment and negating the need for the aforementioned interim application and verification process, beyond the date that the legal framework came into effect.
- 3.20 With an already high pupil roll at Cults Academy, and in anticipation that the roll will increase further in the years ahead, an expansion and renovation of a satellite snack bar in the school has been undertaken, utilising developer obligations funding. This has given the pupils at Cults additional physical space for dining, with an optimised layout which improves customer flow and accessibility in a separate space from the main school dining hall, which has resulted in reduced queuing times, faster service and a more pleasant customer experience overall.

Further changes planned to continue encouraging increasing meal uptakes

- 3.21 On 11 March 2025, Scottish Government wrote to all Scottish Local Authority Chief Executives and Directors of Education, inviting applications to participate in the test of change phase for the school meal expansion programme for families in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment in Secondary 1 to Secondary 3. The test of change will run for one school year, starting in August 2025 and running until July 2026 in eight local authorities representing a variety of geographical areas. Aberdeen City Council have responded to Scottish Government to advise that we wish to be considered for participation in the test of change. We currently await a response from Scottish Government.
- 3.22 A business case with a recommended option for grounds Improvements at St Machar Academy was approved by Finance and Resources Committee on 08 May 2024. Included in the grounds improvements is the installation of a new external food pod and covered dining area. Works are anticipated to complete by August 2025, giving the pupils of St Machar Academy an additional outlet for purchasing their school meals from.
- 3.23 A business case with a recommended option for suitability improvements at Harlaw Academy was also approved by Finance and Resources Committee on 08 May 2024, which will see Harlaw Academy having an extension built. The extension will include space for the kitchen and dining facilities to be relocated from their current location as well as classroom alterations, a rooftop multi-use games area and an outdoor covered space which will include an additional

external point of sale for pupils to purchase their school meals from. The new facilities will offer significant improvements to the dining experience for the pupils at Harlaw and help to address school meal uptake challenges which are apparent at the city-centre located secondary school. The project will commence immediately after the end of the current school session and completion is anticipated in time for the new school session in August 2026.

- 3.24 A full refurbishment of the Bridge of Don Academy kitchen through the (Capital) Condition & Suitability programme was scheduled for summer 2025. Initial quotations received indicated higher than anticipated mechanical and electrical costs. These costs have required to be reviewed, meaning the tendering process could not be completed in time to award the works for the 2025 summer holiday period. An updated business case is being prepared, and the works rescheduled to span the summer holiday period in 2026.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. School catering continues to operate within existing budgets. Improvements are being funded from a combination of sources, including the General Fund Capital Programme, Scottish Government grants, Developer Obligations, and external funding secured by the schools.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no 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. 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 2016-2026</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.

9. IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Assessment	Outcome
Integrated Impact Assessment	No assessment required. I confirm this has been discussed and agreed with the Chief Officer on 19 May 2025.
Data Protection Impact Assessment	Not required
Other	n/a

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

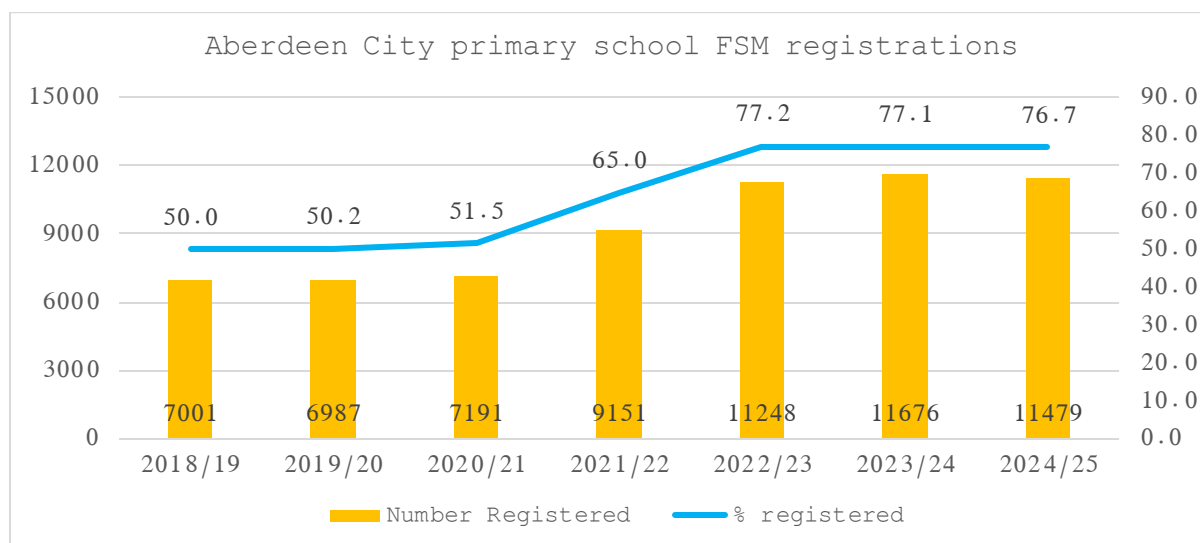
- 10.1 [Free School Meals Annual Update CUS/23/172](#)
- 10.2 [Free School Meals Annual Update F&C/24/180](#)

11. APPENDICES

- 11.1 Appendix 1 – Free School Meal Registration data
- 11.2 Appendix 2 – Secondary School Pre-order App data

12. REPORT AUTHOR CONTACT DETAILS

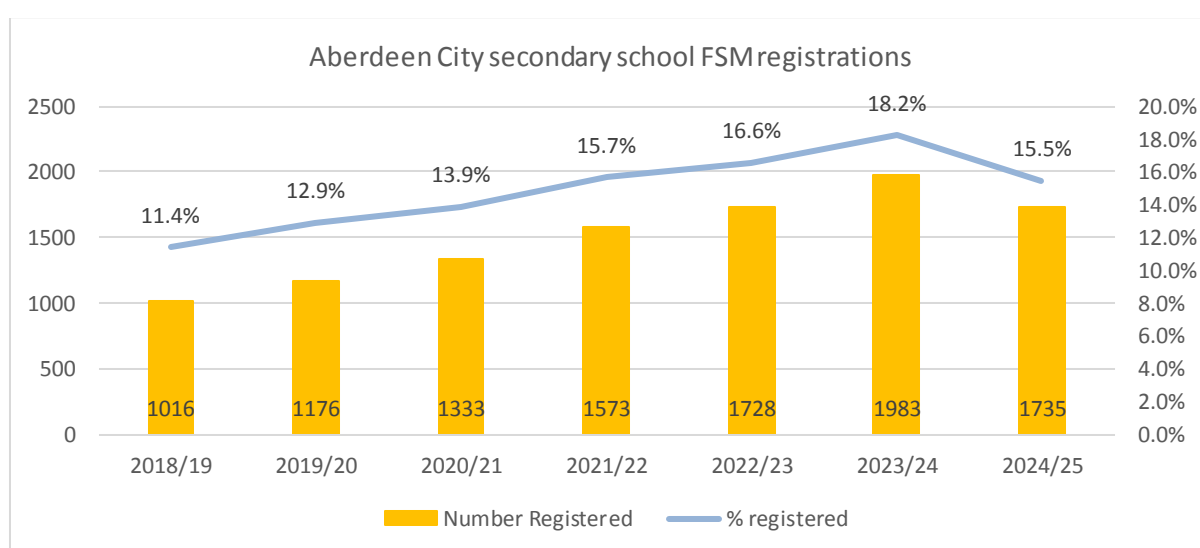
Name	Andy Campbell
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The change in numbers of pupils registered at Primary phase in 2024 is consistent with a small reduction in the school roll in Primary (-1.1%), a marginal shift in the proportion of the school roll which in P6 and 7 stages (and therefore not automatically covered by Universal Entitlement), alongside a reduction in the proportion of pupils in these two stages who meet the criteria for Low Income Related Entitlement.

The trend and pattern in the number and proportion of Primary School pupils registered for FSM has been stable since 2022/23 (when Universal Entitlement was extended to Primary 5) but with a year-on-year fall in the % of eligible, and FSM registered P6/7 pupils from 20.6% in 2023/24 (899 pupils) to 18.2% (774) in 2024/25.

For all local authorities, the % of Primary School pupils eligible and registered for FSM was 76.3% in 2024/25 and 76.3% in 2023/24 with the % of P6/7 pupils eligible through Low Income Entitlement being stable at 21.2% (21.1% in 2023/24).



In Secondary, the change is largely, but not exclusively, driven by a fall in the numbers of pupils who met the criteria for FSM eligibility through Low Income Related

Entitlement. Increases in the proportion of pupils at S4,5 and 6, where active FSM registration is generally lower than for earlier phases, is also an influencing factor in this percentage reduction.

In combination with the increase in secondary school rolls, this has had the effect of lowering the percentage of FSM registrations. Registration levels are now reverting to those that were last recorded prior to the full impacts of the Cost of Living crisis being experienced in the City.

National FSM % registration for secondary pupils in 2024/25 was stable at a figure of 18.2%, having been 18.3% in 2023/24.

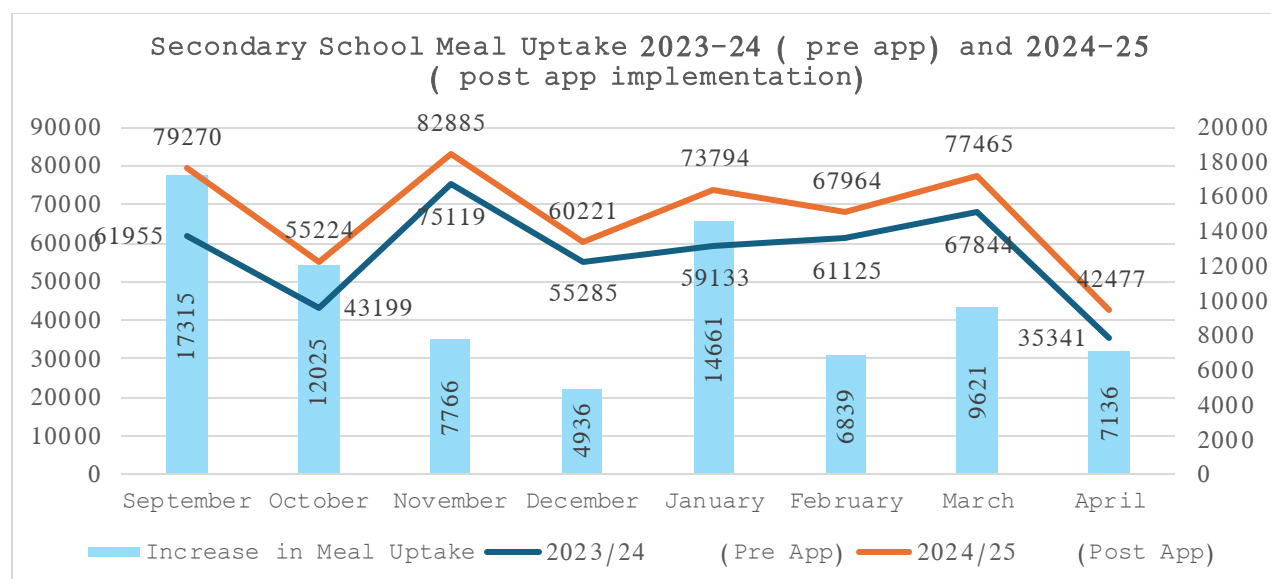
Year	Primary Pupils Universal Provision	Primary Pupils Income Related Registered	Total Primary Pupils Registered	Secondary Pupils Registered	Special School Pupils Registered	Totals	% of school roll registered for FSM
2018	6225	895	7120	1016	33	8169	35.0%
2019	6151	1056	7207	1176	66	8449	35.5%
2020	6075	1046	7121	1333	67	8521	36.2%
2021	8034	1117	9151	1573	76	10800	44.5%
2022	10388	860	11248	1728	140	13116	51.9%
2023	10777	899	11676	1983	130	13739	52.5%
2024	10705	774	11453	1735	125	13313	50.6%

In line with the observations above, there has been a reduction in the number and proportion of pupils, across combined primary, secondary and special school establishments, who are eligible, and registered, for FSM in 2024/25.

Appendix 2

Meals Uptake - Pre and Post Application Values - Secondary Schools

Month	2023/24 (Pre App)	2024/25 (Post App)	Increase in Meal Uptake
September	61955	79270	17315
October	43199	55224	12025
November	75119	82885	7766
December	55285	60221	4936
January	59133	73794	14661
February	61125	67964	6839
March	67844	77465	9621
April	35341	42477	7136
Monthly Average Meal Uptake	57375	67413	10037
Total	459001	539300	80299



Pre-order App Income generation - Secondary Schools

Month	2023/24 (Pre App)	2024/25 (Post App)	Increase in Income
September	£171,651	£215,216	£43,565
October	£117,722	£147,937	£30,215
November	£205,467	£219,872	£14,405
December	£152,468	£160,335	£7,866
January	£159,240	£194,690	£35,450
February	£166,516	£180,344	£13,828
March	£184,427	£205,381	£20,953
April	£96,356	£112,145	£15,789
Monthly Average Meal Income	£156,731	£179,490	£22,759
Total	£1,253,848	£1,435,919	£182,071

