

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Education Operational Delivery Committee
DATE	25 November 2021
EXEMPT	No
CONFIDENTIAL	No
REPORT TITLE	Uptake of Free School Meals in Secondary Schools
REPORT NUMBER	CUS/21/298
DIRECTOR	Andy MacDonald
CHIEF OFFICER	Derek McGowan
REPORT AUTHOR	Neil Carnegie
TERMS OF REFERENCE	1.1.1

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To provide information on actions being taken to maximise the number of eligible secondary school pupils taking free school meals and obtain approval to extend eligibility criteria.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Committee: -

- 2.1 agrees the actions being progressed to maximise the number of eligible secondary school pupils taking free school meals; and
- 2.2 approves the extension of free school meal criteria to include parents/grandparents in receipt of the Child element within Guaranteed Pension Credits.

3. Free School Meals Uptake

- 3.1 The Scottish Government commissions an annual Healthy Living Survey which collects and reports on registration and uptake of school meals. Each school is required to provide a return based on levels on a specified date each February.
- 3.2 The 2020 annual Healthy Living Survey, which is the most recent publication, reports that only 52.3% of secondary pupil registered for free school meals took up that offer on the date of the survey. This ratio is low in comparison with most other Scottish local authorities and the national average which was 70.9%. While noting the limitations of a single day survey, historical reporting demonstrates that uptake in Aberdeen has been comparatively low and with a decreasing trend.
- 3.3 The annual report to Educational Operational Delivery Committee in June 2021 reported significant progress had been made in increasing registrations by

children at secondary schools and over the year 2020/21 registrations have increased from 1,106 to 1,441 (30%).

3.4 Appendix A provides a breakdown by secondary school of number of children registered for free school meals, the number present on census day and number of children that took a free school meal on census day. Appendix B expresses these figures as percentages.

3.5 This data identifies St Machar Academy and Northfield Academy as having the highest numbers of children registered for free school meals and the highest percentages of children registered for free school meals compared with total school roll. These schools also had the highest number of children in school on census day entitled to but not taking a free school meal.

3.6 Research and local intelligence identifies a range of factors impacting on the number of young people registered for free school meals and those then taking their meals. These include

- Parental awareness of availability of free school meals
- Ease of application process
- Access to additional benefits through registration for free school meals
- Quality and choice of food
- Stigma
- Inconvenience of long queue times
- Desire to leave the school to get exercise and fresh air
- School meal facilities

4. Improving registrations and uptake

4.1 A multi-service officer working group has been established to develop our strategies to increase registrations, meal uptake and more generally support families with low incomes. This involves Early Intervention and Community Empowerment (communities and housing, financial inclusion and revenues and benefits) and Operations (school catering and education).

4.2 Key areas identified by the group for improvement are communication, simplifying application processes and introducing new serving facilities outside the traditional setting of a school meal canteen. In addition, the group has identified a small group of grandparents who are not included within current eligibility criteria who could be supported.

4.3 A review of content on the Council's main website pages and individual secondary schools has been undertaken. This identified gaps in information, inconsistency and opportunities to improve how information is organised and presented. The improvements to the web information is due to be completed and published by 22 November 2021. In addition, higher frequency of communications to parents informing them about free school meals is in place. Officers are confident that parents are more aware of the provision of free school meals now.

- 4.4 Significant improvements have been made to streamline the application process. This has included automatic registrations based on benefit entitlements, families only having to complete one application for all children (rather than previously one application per child) and by the end of the current school term there will be a combined application for free school meals and clothing grants. Parents report that the application process is better than before. Increased registrations are evident now that the different entitlements are being aligned into one application process.
- 4.5 A review of best practice in other Scottish local authorities has identified use of a 'pod' or mobile delivery unit as being successful. As previously noted, a recognised barrier to take up is the desire of pupils to leave the building to get exercise and fresh air away from the school building. A solution proven to be effective in other areas is an external pod serving food. This approach is already successful at Oldmachar Academy and the Operational Delivery Committee in September 2021 awarded £75,000 to extend this approach. Based on the evidence set out above Northfield and St Machar Academies are our priorities. This introduction of a further pod is anticipated to increase overall uptake of school meals and may also be utilised outside school times as relevant – eg for commercial purposes; and, to distribute free or low cost food in priority localities. We anticipate that a pod will be introduced by the end of the 2021/22 school year and we will closely evaluate its impact to determine any future proposals to further extend this approach for other schools.
- 4.6 Officers will engage directly with the school communities at St Machar and Northfield and seek opportunities to speak with the young people who choose not to access their entitlement in order to better understand the issues at school level. This will help us understand if the choice of food, stigma, facilities, perceived inconvenience or desire to leave school grounds is impacting most on uptake. This may guide consideration of a further roll out of the 'pod' approach or may identify other means of increasing uptake.
- 4.7 The Scottish Government sets national criteria in respect of eligibility for school meals and local authorities have discretion to make local additions to this. In November 2020, the Education Operational Delivery Committee used its discretion to extend local eligibility for families to include those that would have been entitled if they could still claim Child Tax Credit/Working Tax Credits.
- 4.8 With the ending of new claims for Child Tax Credits, amendments were made to the Pension Credit rules to pay an element for each child within Guaranteed Pension Credits to any parents and grandparents who are responsible for a child and therefore children are not entitled to free school meals in these circumstances. This change has not been updated within the current Free School Meal eligibility. Scottish Government review the eligibility each year and will be looking at this issue moving forward. Until this is resolved, we recommend extending the eligibility criteria to include Parents/Grandparents who are receive a child element within their Guaranteed Pension Credits award.
- 4.9 The Scottish Government has made a commitment to universal provision of free school meals for all primary age pupils. Primary 1 to 4 pupils are already

receiving free school meals. Primary 5 pupils will all receive free lunches from January 2022 with Primary 6's and 7's from August 2022.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 On the basis that 12 additional families apply due to the introduction of extended criteria and their children take free school meals then the annual cost would be approximately £6,000. This can be contained within current budgets.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 No new implications arising from this report.

6. MANAGEMENT OF RISK

Category	Risk	Low (L) Medium (M) High (H)	Mitigation
Strategic Risk	N/A		
Compliance	N/A		
Operational	There is a risk that families experience food poverty.	L	We will continue to monitor effectiveness of systems and processes to maximise registrations and uptake of free school meals.
Financial	There is a risk of reduced income due to less school meals being paid for by children.	L	Scottish Government grant funding and monitoring of impact on budgets.
Reputational	N/A		
Environment / Climate	N/A		

7. OUTCOMES

<u>COUNCIL DELIVERY PLAN</u>	
Aberdeen City Local Outcome Improvement Plan	
Prosperous Economy Stretch Outcomes	N/A
Prosperous People Stretch Outcomes	Maximising uptake of free school meal entitlement will contribute to improve health and development of children.
Prosperous Place Stretch Outcomes	Maximising uptake of free school meal entitlement supports the delivery of LOIP Stretch Outcome 13 – No one in Aberdeen will go without food due to poverty by 2026.

8. IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Assessment	Outcome
Impact Assessment	Maximising uptake of free school meal entitlement has the potential to impact positively in a range of protected groups and there would be no negative impact on equalities and human rights.
Data Protection Impact Assessment	Not required.

9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Free School Meals Update 2020/21 report to Education Operational Delivery Committee - 3 June 2021

Food Insecurity report to Operational Delivery Committee - 16 September 2021

School Healthy Living Survey 2020

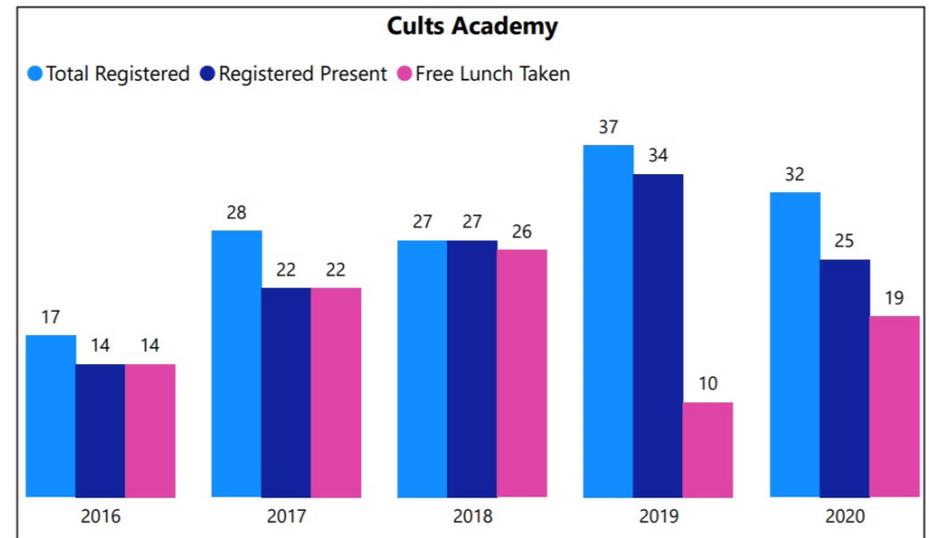
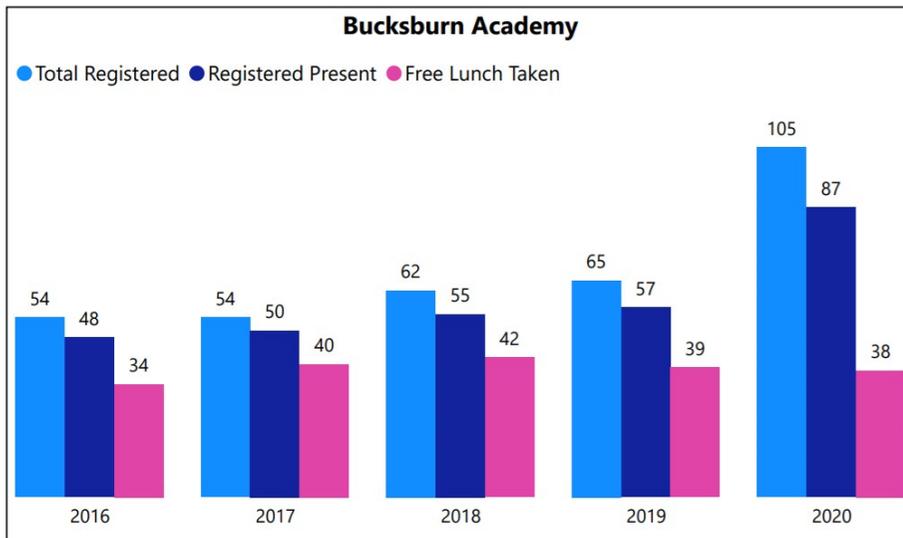
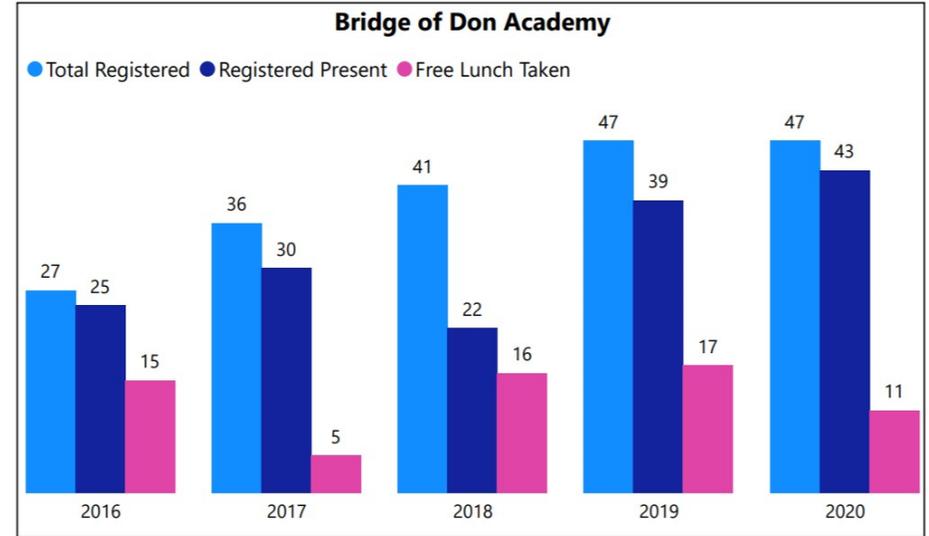
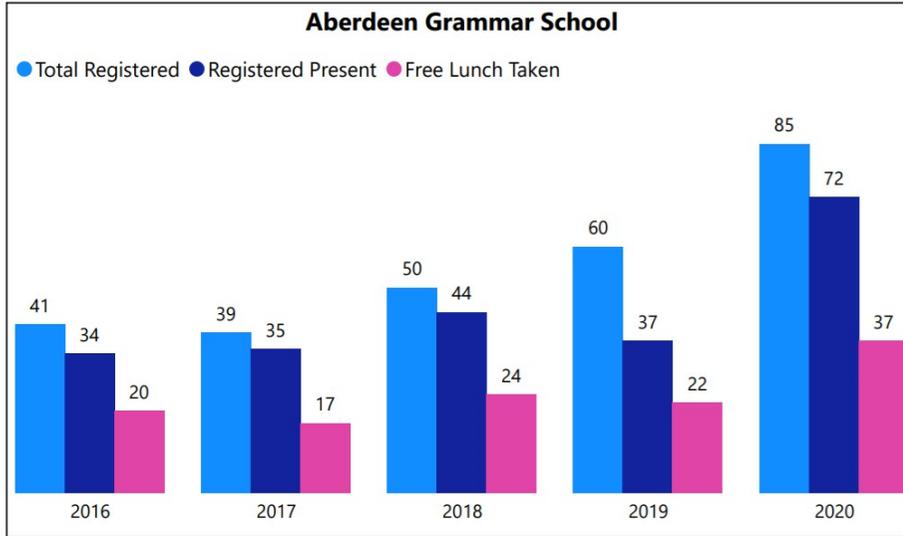
10. APPENDICES

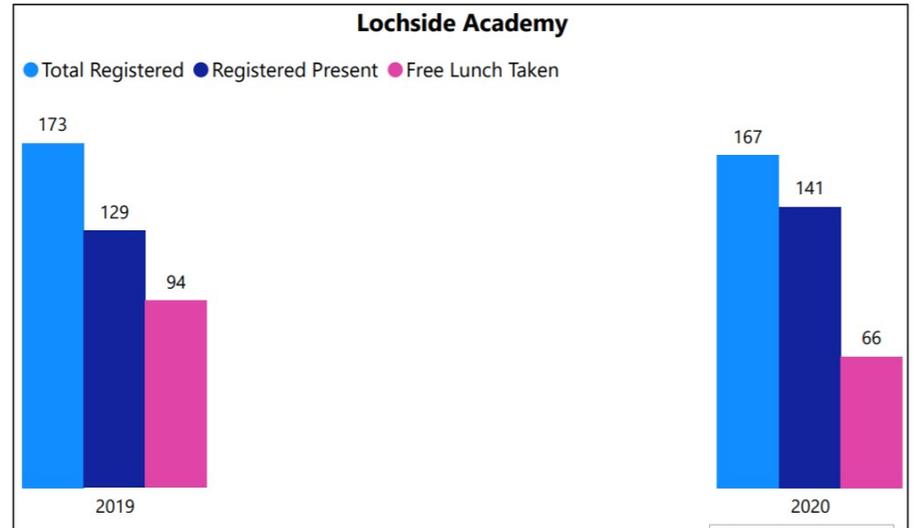
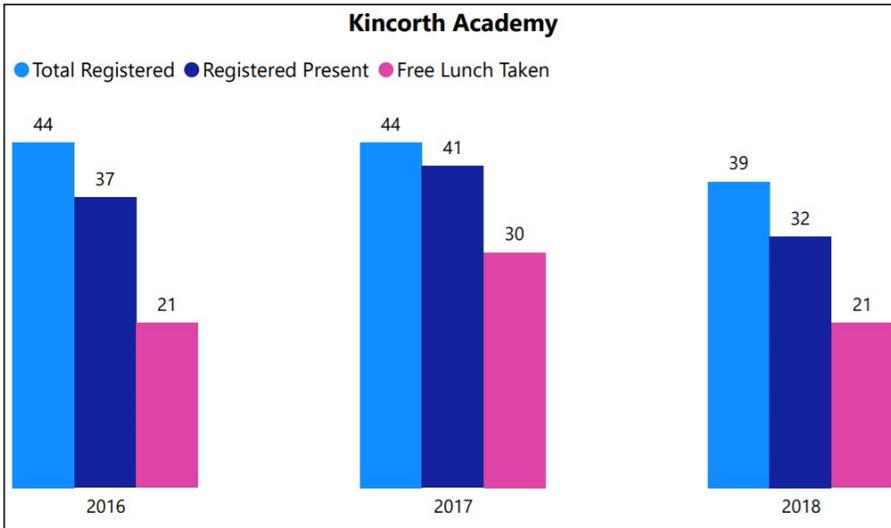
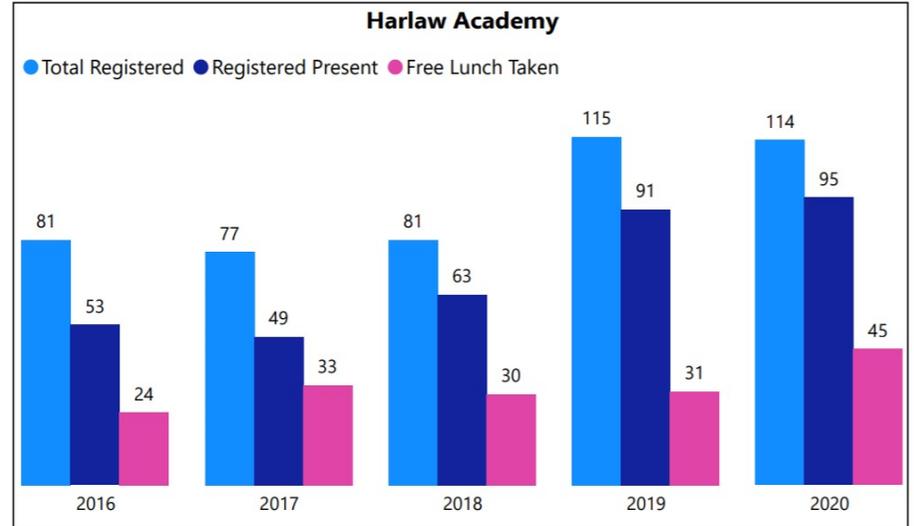
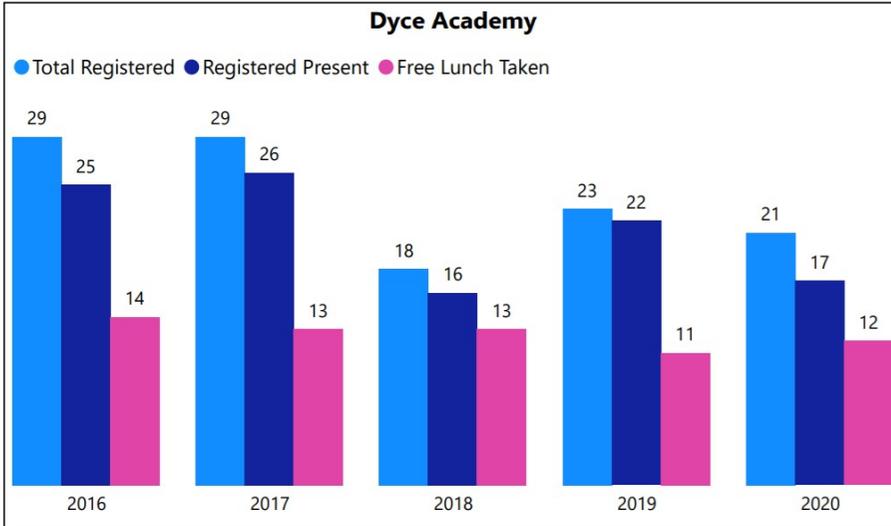
Free school meal uptake by school 2020/21

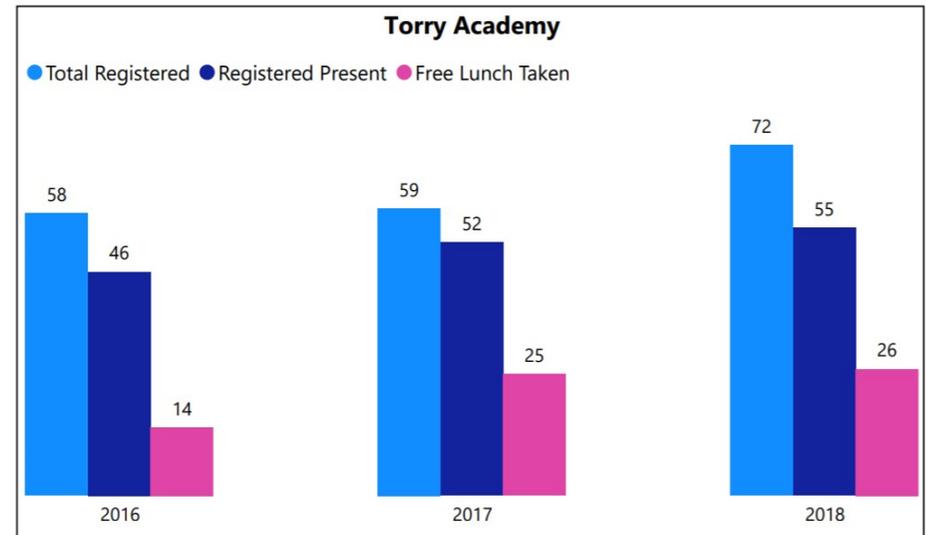
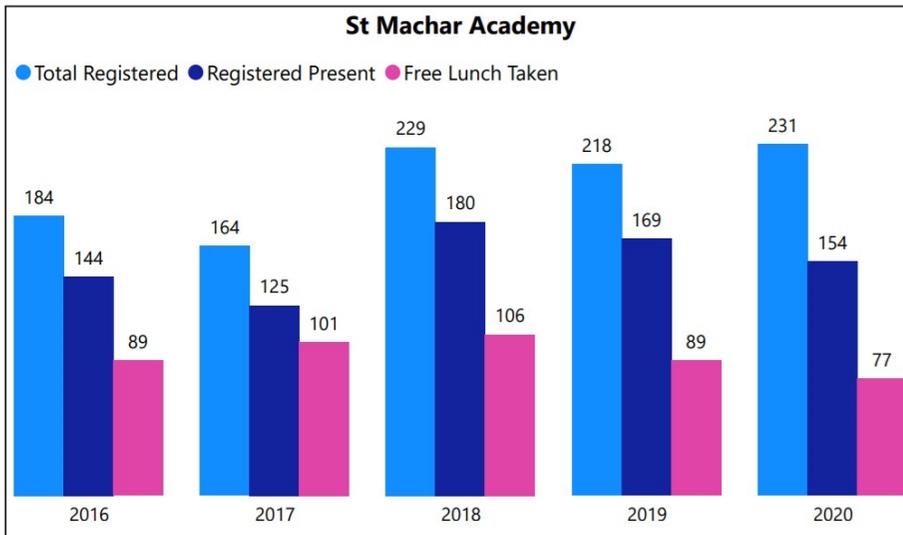
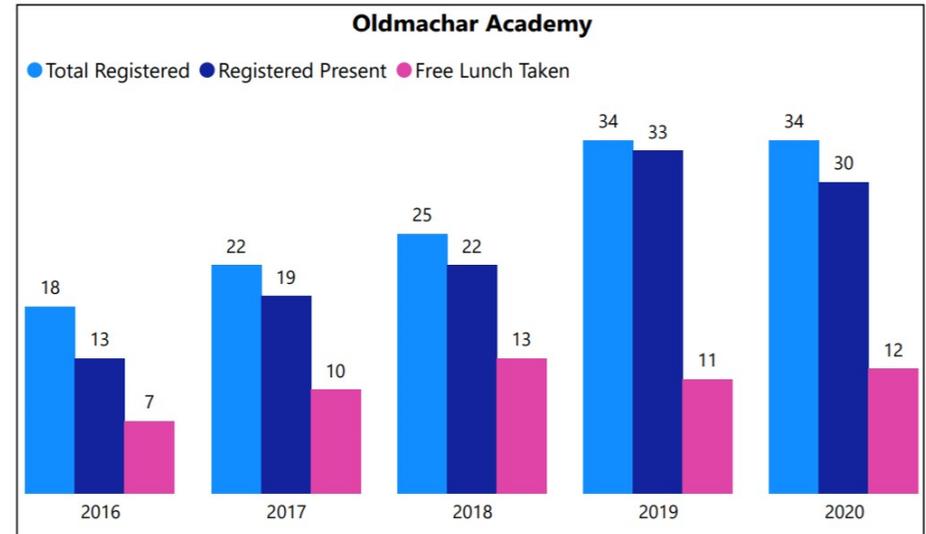
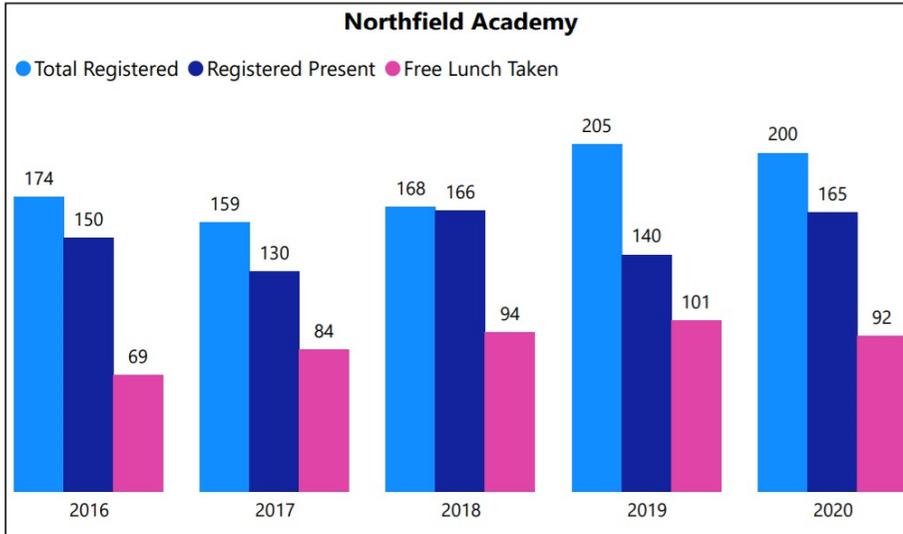
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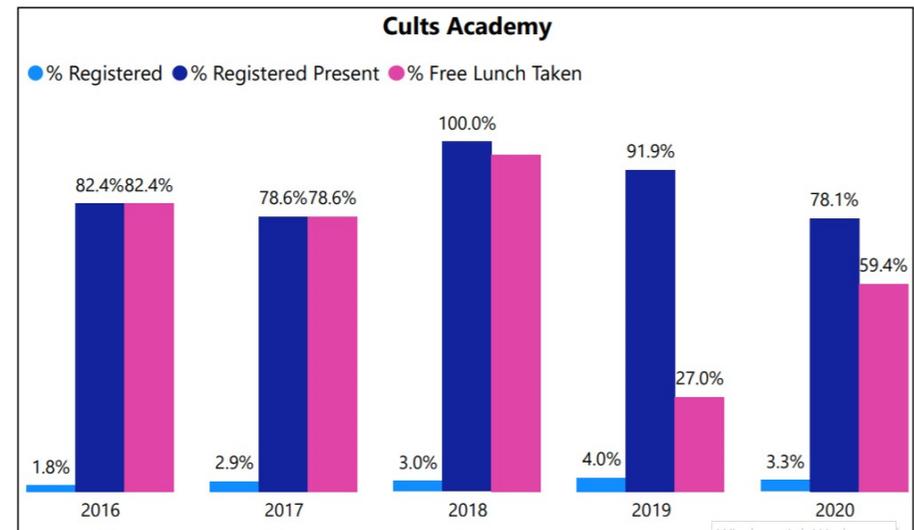
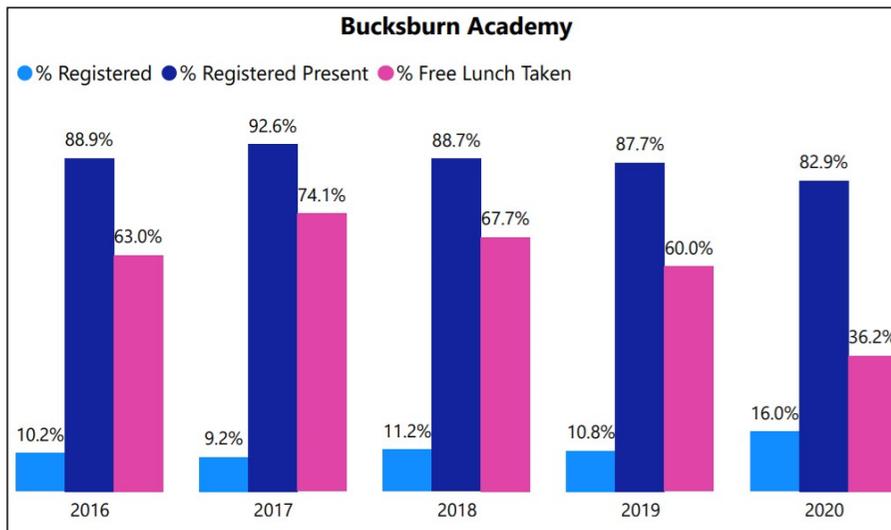
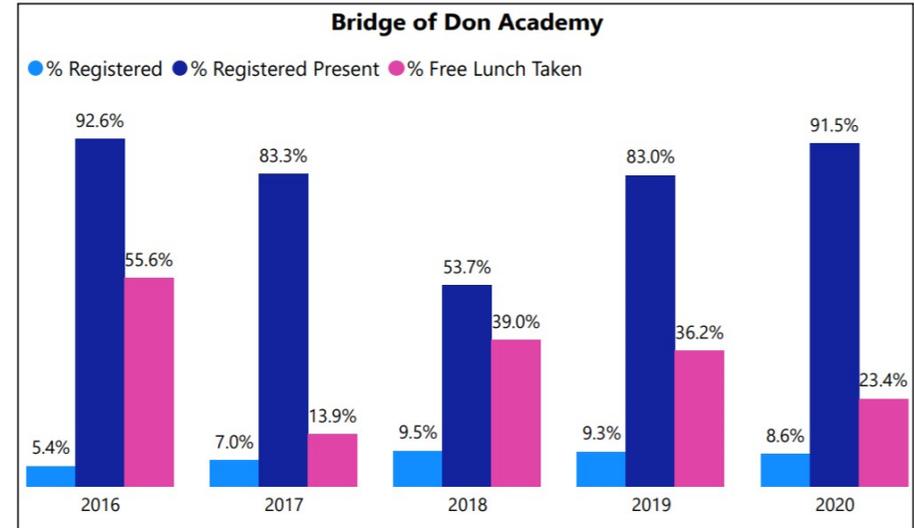
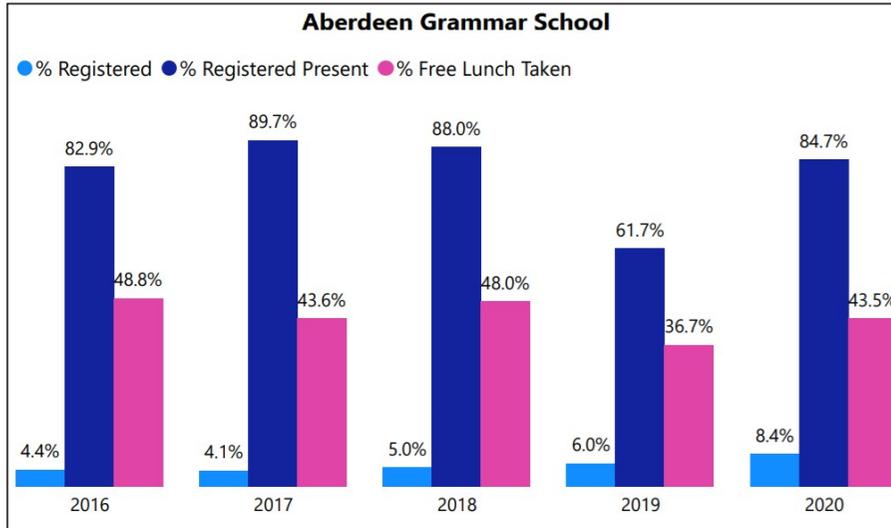
Appendix A

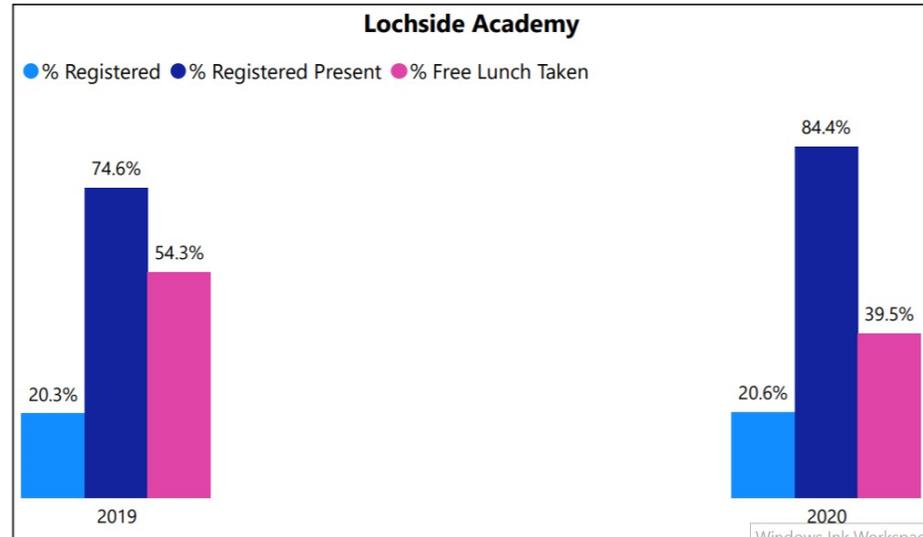
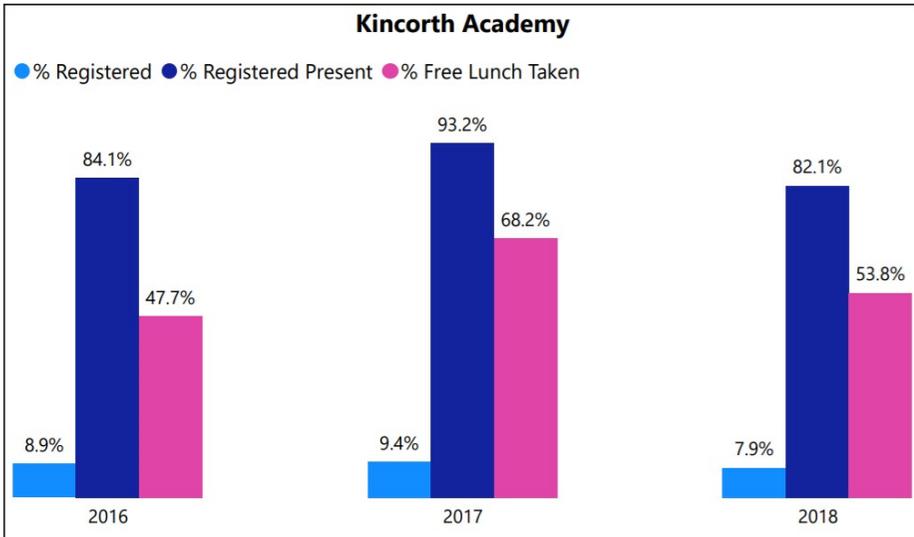
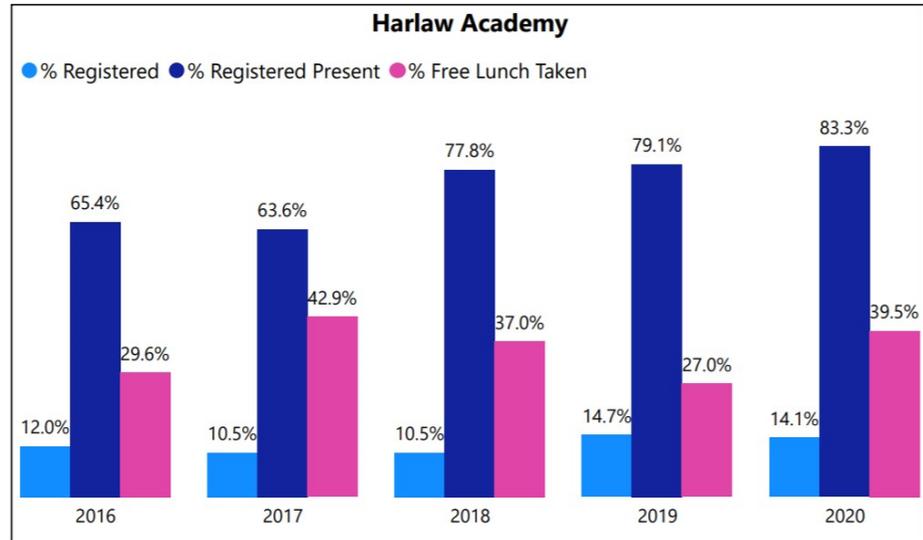
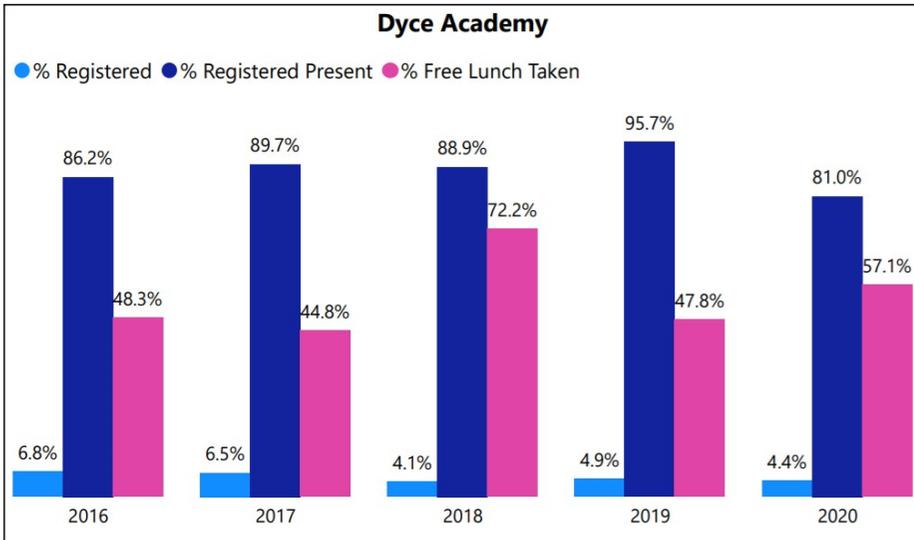






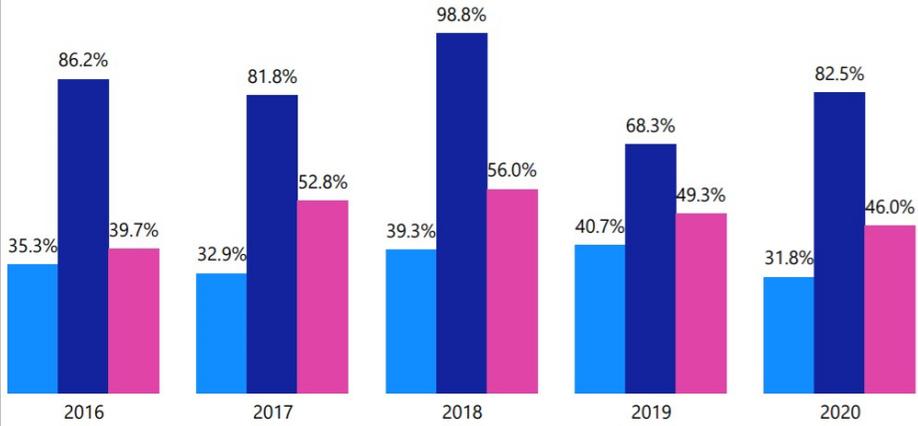
Appendix B





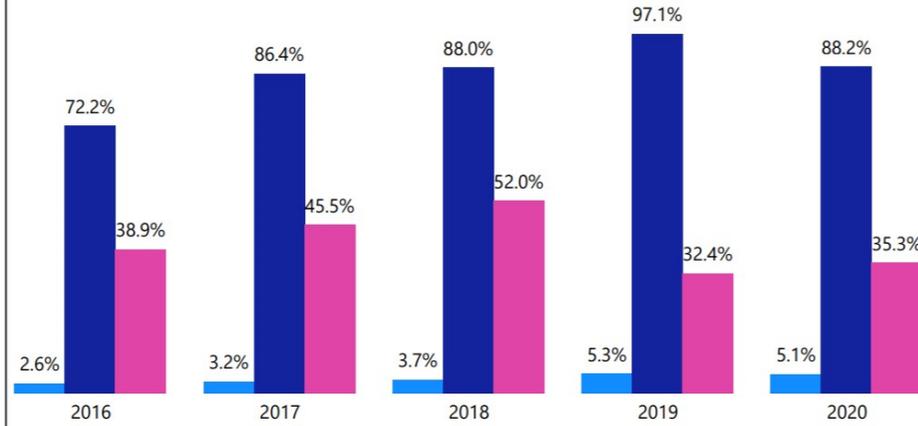
Northfield Academy

● % Registered ● % Registered Present ● % Free Lunch Taken



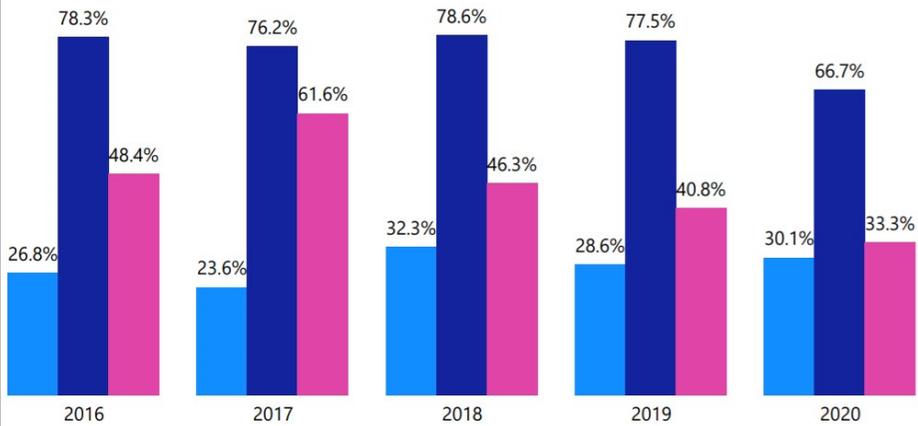
Oldmachar Academy

● % Registered ● % Registered Present ● % Free Lunch Taken



St Machar Academy

● % Registered ● % Registered Present ● % Free Lunch Taken



Torry Academy

● % Registered ● % Registered Present ● % Free Lunch Taken

