

Policies to increase provision of affordable primary school meals: A Cost-benefit Analysis (CBA) case study in England.

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Friday 20th June 2025



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**Centre for
Economics of
Obesity**

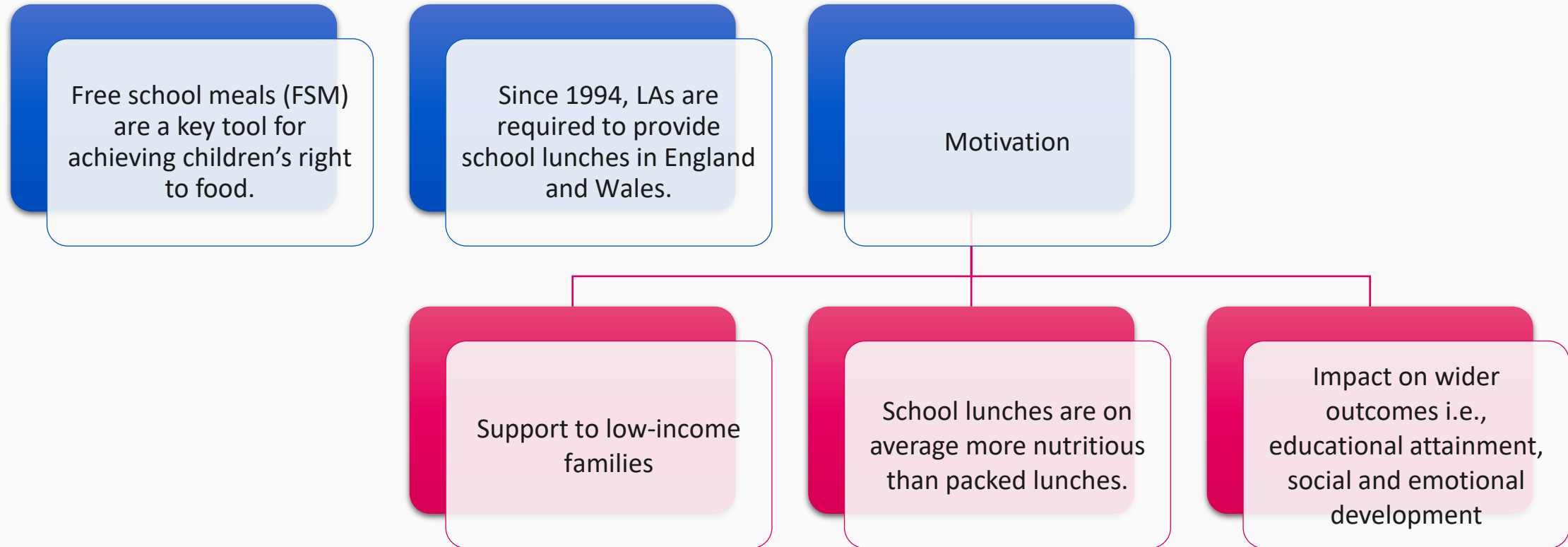
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Background



Objectives

- To compare the costs and benefits of alternative policies to increase access to primary school meals in England.
- Identify which option delivered the best economic value



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Current/Business as usual (BAU) Policy

- FSMs provided through the Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM) and Means-tested system
- Universal Infant FSM (UIFSM) provides to all children in reception, Y1 and Y2
- Means tested (Yr3 and above) provides to families on tax credit or Universal Credit



***New Government Announcement
FSMs will be expanded
to all children in receipt
of Universal Credit
starting September 2026***



Stakeholder Consultation



Regional government



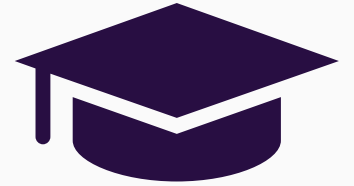
Local Authority



Primary Schools



Policy Sector



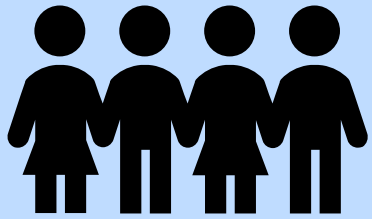
Academic sector

A total of 17 stakeholders across these five groups were consulted through interviews to shape the policy scenarios.

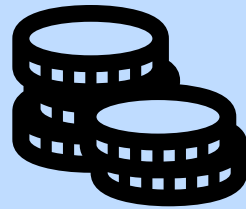


New policy options (following stakeholder engagement)

Wider Expansion

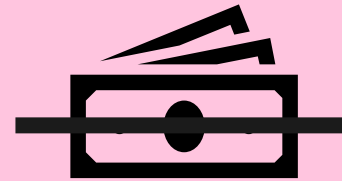


Universal



Subsidised Scheme

Narrow Expansion



Universal Credit



Schools in need
>40%, >50% & >60%



Costs

Direct costs

1

Government

Variable/recurrent cost of FSM provision

Fixed capital payments

2

Subsidised meal policy

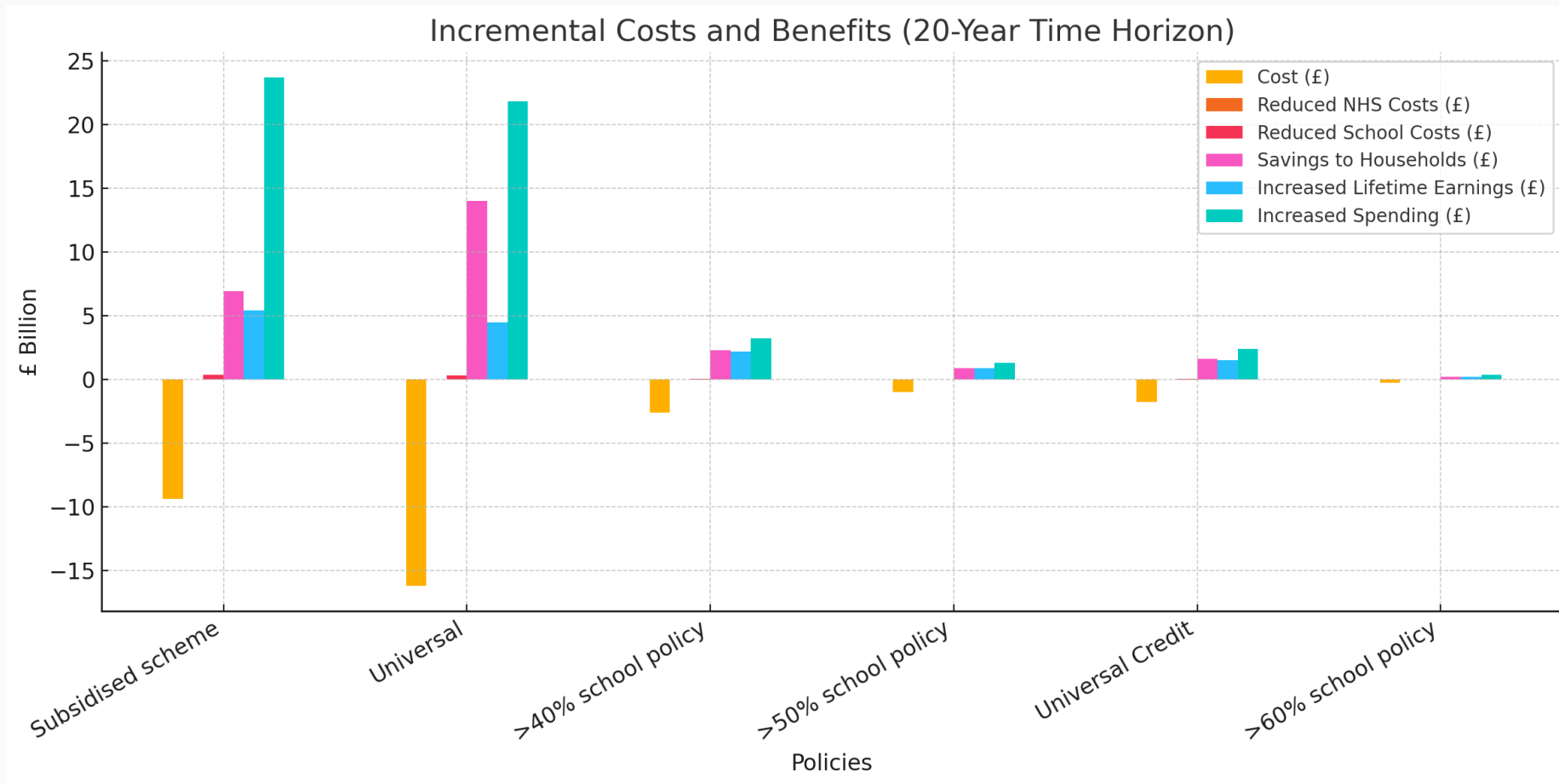
Household contributions towards a school meal (if not eligible for FSM)



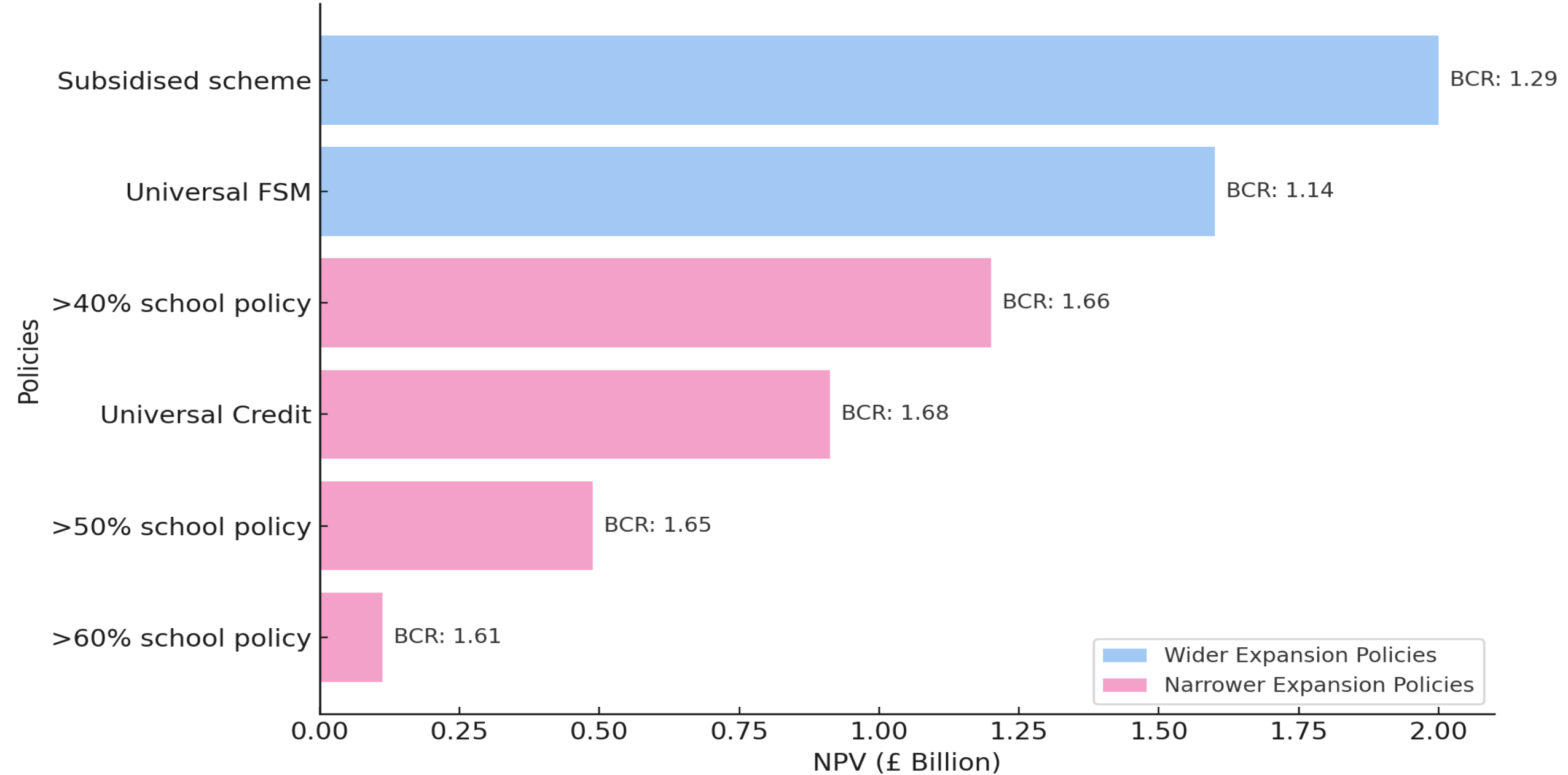
Benefits quantified in CBA

Direct Benefits		Wider Benefits	
1	Health and Nutrition <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Reduced NHS cost (reductions in obesity)	5	School Food and Economy <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Increased spending in the local and wider economy from increase in demand for catering staff
2	Education <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Reduced cost to schools	6	Environmental <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Impact on school-related food waste
3	Employment and Economy <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Increased lifetime earnings and resulting contributions to the economy		
4	Households <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Reduced cost to households		





Cost-Benefit Results: Policies Ordered by NPV (20-Year Horizon)



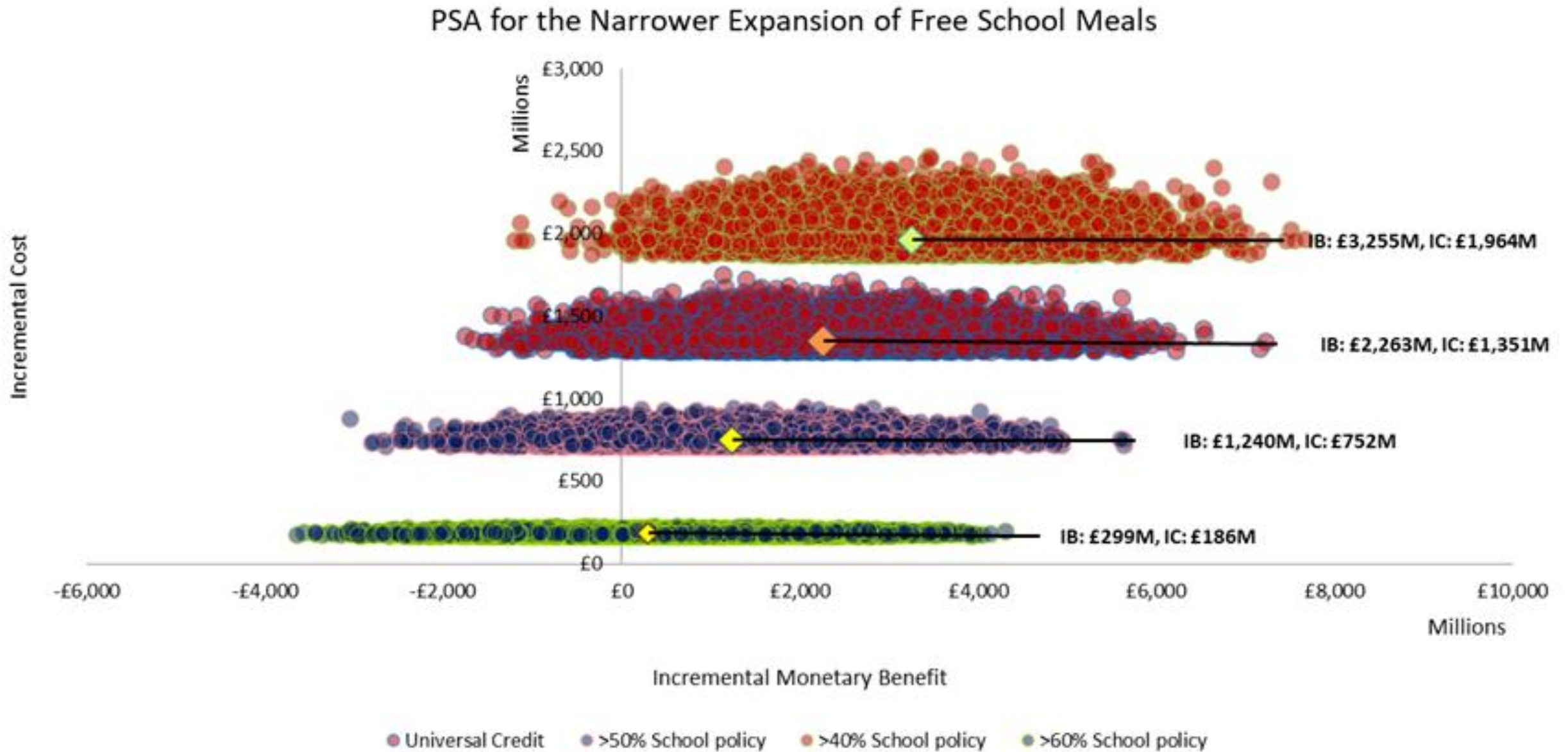
Probabilistic Sensitivity Analysis

Policy option	% of Positive Net Present Value
Wider Expansion of Free School Meals	
Subsidised scheme	82.80%
Universal FSM	78.85%
Narrower Expansion of Free School Meals	
>40% school policy	84.67%
Universal Credit	76.26%
>50% school policy	66.63%
>60% school policy	54.54%

Percentage of Positive Net Present Values generated from the 10,000 iterations for each policy- indicating the likelihood of delivering a positive return on investment.



Scatter plots for each of the policy options



Each 'cloud' represents the cluster of NPVs generated from the 10000 iterations.

Discussion

- All new policies yield a positive ROI.
- For a wide expansion of FSM, the subsidised scheme delivered the highest ROI.
- For a narrow expansion of FSM, the >40% school policy delivered the highest ROI.
- It all comes down to budget available:
 - For a higher budget, opt for a subsidised scheme.
 - For a tighter budget, opt for prioritising schools with >40% current FSM eligibility.
- The greater the coverage and investment, the greater the economic return generated.

Closing the Hunger Gap: The Case for Free School Meal Auto-Enrolment



Professor Maria Bryant, University of York

Mahdi, S., Padgett, L., Oxley, R., & Bremner M, Goudie S , Doherty B

**FIXOURFOOD ACTION-ORIENTED PROJECT
(BB/V004581/1)**

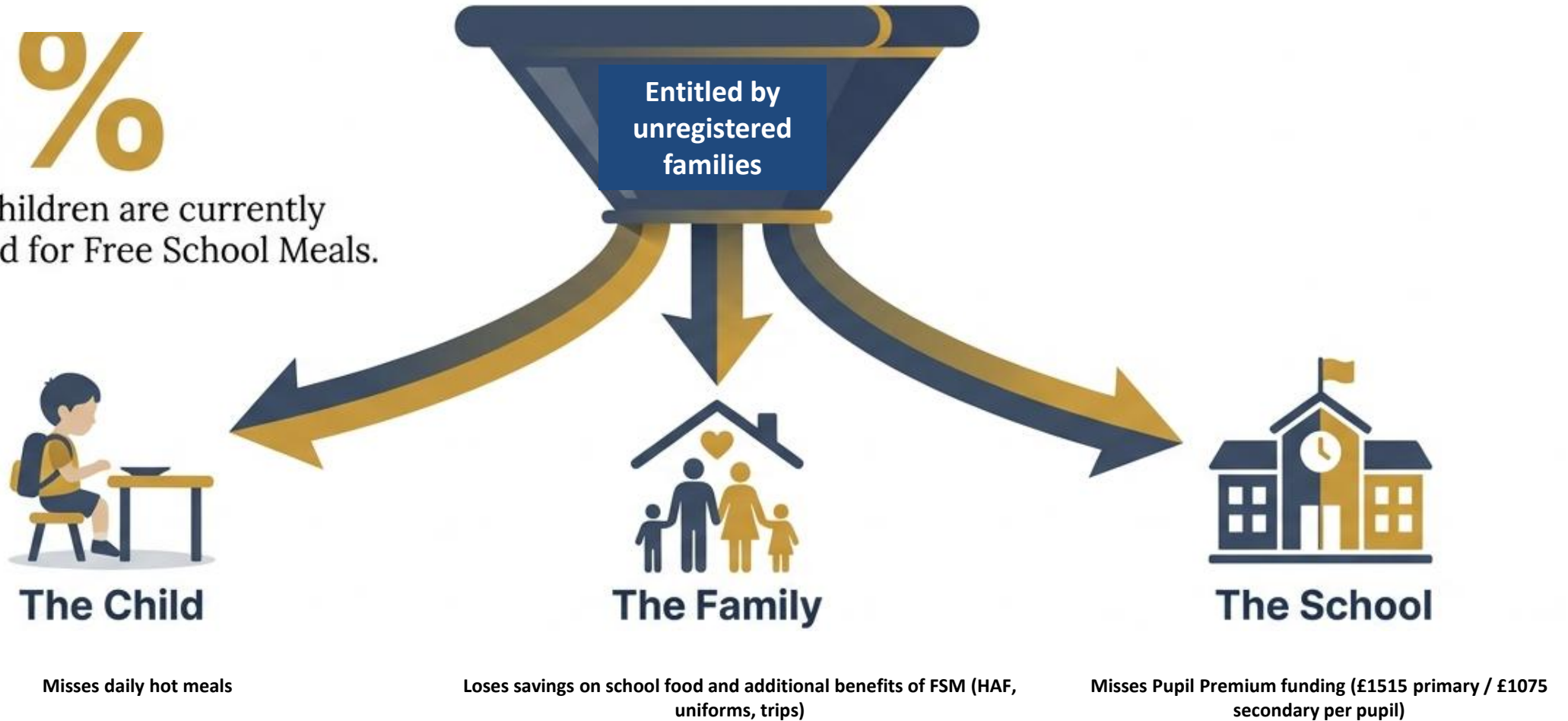


Some slides have been created using NotebookLM – from our outputs. AI has not been used in research delivery or analysis

~11% of those entitled to free school meals are not registered

11%

of eligible children are currently unregistered for Free School Meals.



11% (n=161,400) [Lord A, Easby J, Evans H. Pupils not claiming Free School Meals - 2013. Department for Education; 2013](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/266339/DFE-RR319.pdf)
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/266339/DFE-RR319.pdf

May be closer to 220,000 [Feeding Britain. 2024. https://feedingbritain.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Feeding-Britain-FSM-registration-working-group-final-report-Nov-2024-v2.pdf](https://feedingbritain.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Feeding-Britain-FSM-registration-working-group-final-report-Nov-2024-v2.pdf)

Auto-enrolment processes



- Not 'auto' for local authorities
- Variation in approaches & databases used
- Key issues
 - Capacity (existing vs. new roles)
 - Finances to fill funding gap, deliver the processes – funding for schools, not LAs
 - Data access and sharing legalities
- Facilitators
 - Senior buy-in
 - Knowledge sharing with other LAs
 - FixOurFood webinars and toolkit

FixOurFood **FSM auto-enrolment toolkit**

Version 9.0



Barrier: Data Access & Silos

Solution: Pre-designed data specification forms and workflows.

Barrier: GDPR/Legal

Solution: Template Data Protection Impact Assessments (DPIAs) provided.

Barrier: Capacity

Solution: Proven reduction in workload over time.

Acceptability

Drop out ~1.3%

“

“I used to spend up to £150... now it is reduced to about £80 to £90. I’m able to **save** that money.”

— Parent [P06]

“

“It saves you a lot of stress... not worrying that your child is going to school empty-handed.”

— Parent [P15]

“

“We have quite a few illiterate parents... They find application forms incredibly difficult.”

— School Leader [SL06]

Schools should teach, not chase paperwork.

- **Eliminates 'Chasing'**: Removes the need for staff to pursue families for forms.
- **Captures 'The Stragglers'**: Identifies families who didn't realise eligibility changed (e.g., job loss).
- **Reduces Stigma**: Enrolment happens in the background, so children aren't singled out.



“That was all done for her automatically, which has really, really helped her son have a hot meal every day.” – School Leader [SL04]

Impact: Immediate results at scale.

Data from 84 areas		
Data sharing N=13 areas	Surveys N=84 areas	Unofficial N=4 areas

37 areas implemented

17 areas in set up

24 areas in early stages

First year of implementation

Extra 16,663 children*
Range 40-2260
x̄ 538 per area

Extra £20,400,000 pupil premium
Range £58200-£2,805,300
x̄ £657,058 per area

*Data for 1st round of implementation only (n=31); excludes areas that conducted a smaller pilot (n=1), those not implementing auto-enrolment approaches (1) and those with improbable data (n=2)

Impact: Immediate results at scale.

Likely underestimation:

Most launched >once
depends on welfare
sources

DATA ARE MESSY

Data from subsequent
rounds
>24,000 extra children

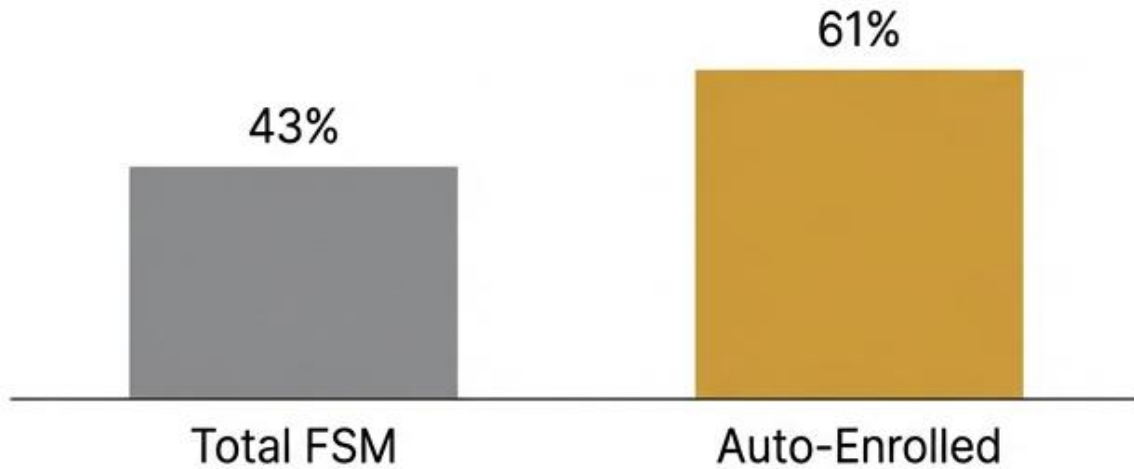
s	
	Unofficial N=4 areas

20,400,000 pupils
age £58200-£2,805,300
£657,058 per area

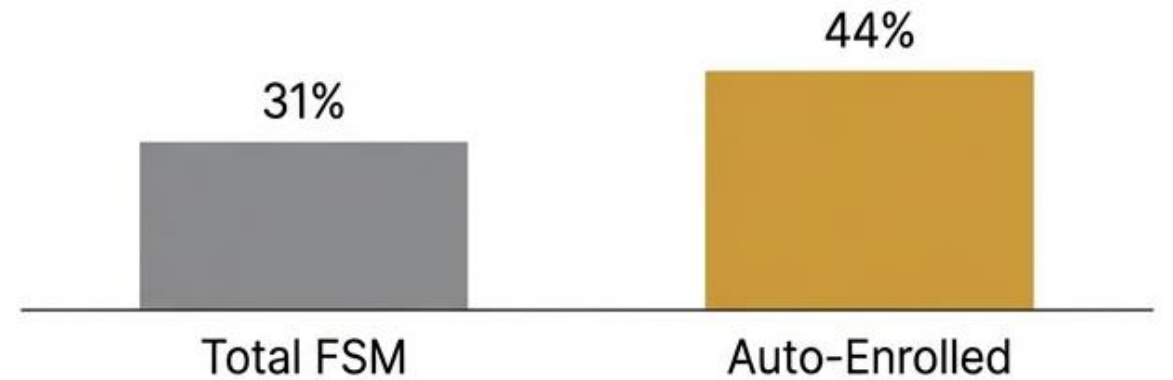
*Data for 1st round of implementation only (n=31); excludes areas that conducted a smaller pilot (n=1), those not implementing auto-enrolment approaches (1) and those with improbable data (n=2)

Equity (Provision data)

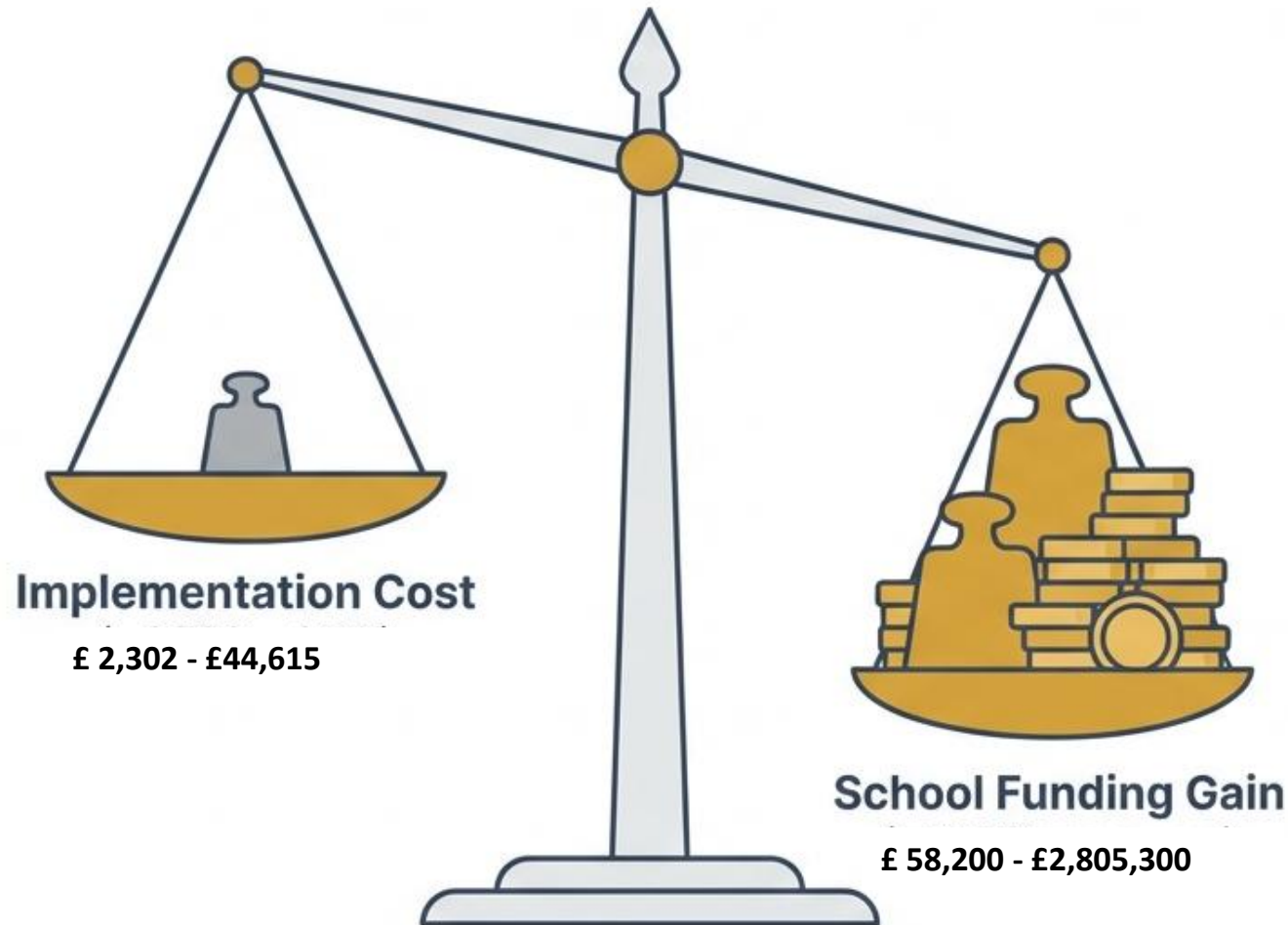
Ethnicity (BAME Representation)



Language (English as Additional Language)



The Financial Multiplier.



While Local Authorities bear the small setup cost, the funding flows directly to schools to support the most disadvantaged pupils.

“The more children you have on free school meals... the more funding you get... that’s wonderful because we can spend it on areas that are needed.” – School Leader [SL11]

Future impact

- National auto-enrolment advocated, but the dial isn't moving yet
- Auto-enrolment influenced national discussions on data sharing
- Lots going on in school food
 - Removal of transitional protection
 - Universal credit cut-off applied (Pupil premium still based on current cut-off)
 - New ways to fund schools – not FSM?
 - New school food standards
 - Movement in monitoring processes

Evidence from this project is currently driving amendments in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.



Acknowledgments



www.fixourfood.org



Prof Bob Doherty and Katherine Denby (FoF leads); Prof Maria Bryant (FoF in Schools lead); Dr Sundus Mahdi; Dr Zeynep Caferoglu Akin; Rob Oxley; Michelle Scaife; Dr Wendy Burton; Louise Padgett; Dr Grace Gardener; Maddie Sinclair; Nicola Nixon; Dr Annie Connolly; Dr Belinda Morris; Sophie Stewart, Patience Gansallo, Katie McGinty



Expanding FSMs

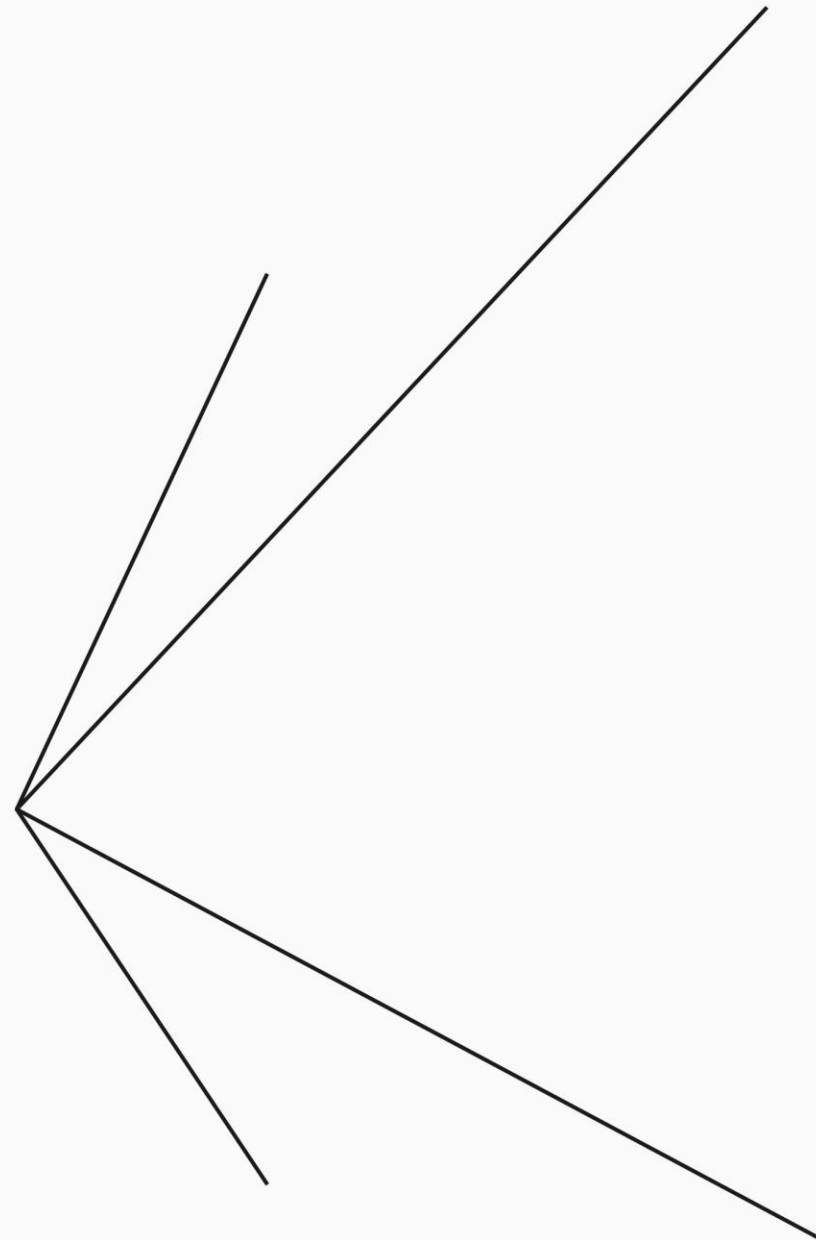
How do we implement?

Catrin P Jones, Bisola Osifowora, Viktorija Kesaite, Irina Pokhilenko, Steven Cummins, Rachel Loopstra, Alexia Sawyer, Amy Yau, Martin White, [Emma Frew](#)

Mandala Consortium



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Policy Context: Why FSM Expansion Matters

- 19% of households with children food insecure (2024)
- 38.7% among Universal Credit households
- Food insecurity linked to poorer diet quality, obesity risk and lower educational attainment
- Growing advocacy for universal or widened FSM eligibility
- Policymaker hesitancy **driven by affordability, political acceptability and implementation feasibility**

Study Aim and Objectives

- Use stakeholder feedback to examine potential implementation challenges of FSM expansion in England
- Analyse contextual and implementation influences across system levels
- Generate stakeholder-informed recommendations for policy delivery



Methods

- Within the CBA study presented by Bisola we undertook stakeholder consultation to inform the methods
- Semi-structured interviews (n = 17 stakeholders)
- Participants: national govt, regional/local authorities, school leaders, academics, policy advocates
- Discussion of multiple policy scenarios and draft conceptual model
- Analysed the data using the Framework Method
- Deductive coding using 'CICI' framework (context and implementation of complex interventions)



Present our findings across 3 levels:

Macro:
national
policy context

Meso: local
authorities &
schools

Micro: parents
& teachers



Macro-Level Findings (National)

The context:

- Socioeconomic pressures (cost of living) heighten FSM urgency but also constrains fiscal capacity
- FSM registration is linked to pupil premium funding and transitional protection policies which complicates eligibility
- Political framing (fairness vs 'nanny state') shapes acceptability

Stakeholder recommendations:

- Need clear national guidance
- Integrate FSM expansion with benefits system reform
- Strengthen monitoring of School Food Standards
- Provide sustainable recurrent and capital funding



Meso-Level Findings (Local Authorities & Schools)

The context:

- Schools differ in structure e.g. catering contracts, infrastructure capacity, and financial resilience
- Infrastructure constraints: kitchens, dining space, supervision capacity
- LAs have limited access to benefits data which complicates enrolment processes

Stakeholder recommendations:

- Minimise administrative burden on families
- Strengthen local monitoring of school food standards
- Link FSM eligibility with wider family support systems



Micro-Level Findings (Families, Pupils & Teachers)

The context:

- Families just above eligibility threshold often face financial pressure but remain excluded
- Packed lunch vs school meal framed as autonomy and choice issue
- Teachers are managing hunger, meal debt and distress in classrooms

Stakeholder recommendations (avoidance of stigma):

- Prioritise universal or auto-enrolment approaches where feasible
- Ensure discretion at point of service to prevent identification
- Integrate school meal policy with broader pastoral and family support



Eligibility expansion ≠ uptake

unless delivery is stigma-aware

S
T
I
G
M
A

Where stigma shows up

- Registration/means-testing
- Visible differences at point of service
- Peer perceptions at lunchtime

Why it matters

- Lower uptake among those who would benefit most
- Negative social experiences at school
- Undermines intended equity and health gains

Implementation implications

- Prefer universal or auto-enrolment approaches
- Use familiar admin systems (reduce form-filling)
- Ensure equal choice/experience at point of service

Cross-Cutting Mechanisms Identified

- Equity — particularly around eligibility “cliff edges”.
- Stigma — shaping uptake and social experience.
- Meal quality — which must be protected during expansion.
- Costs and funding — including capital investment in kitchens and dining space.
- And data systems — registration, monitoring and communication.
- These mechanisms interact across levels — reinforcing the systems nature of FSM policy.



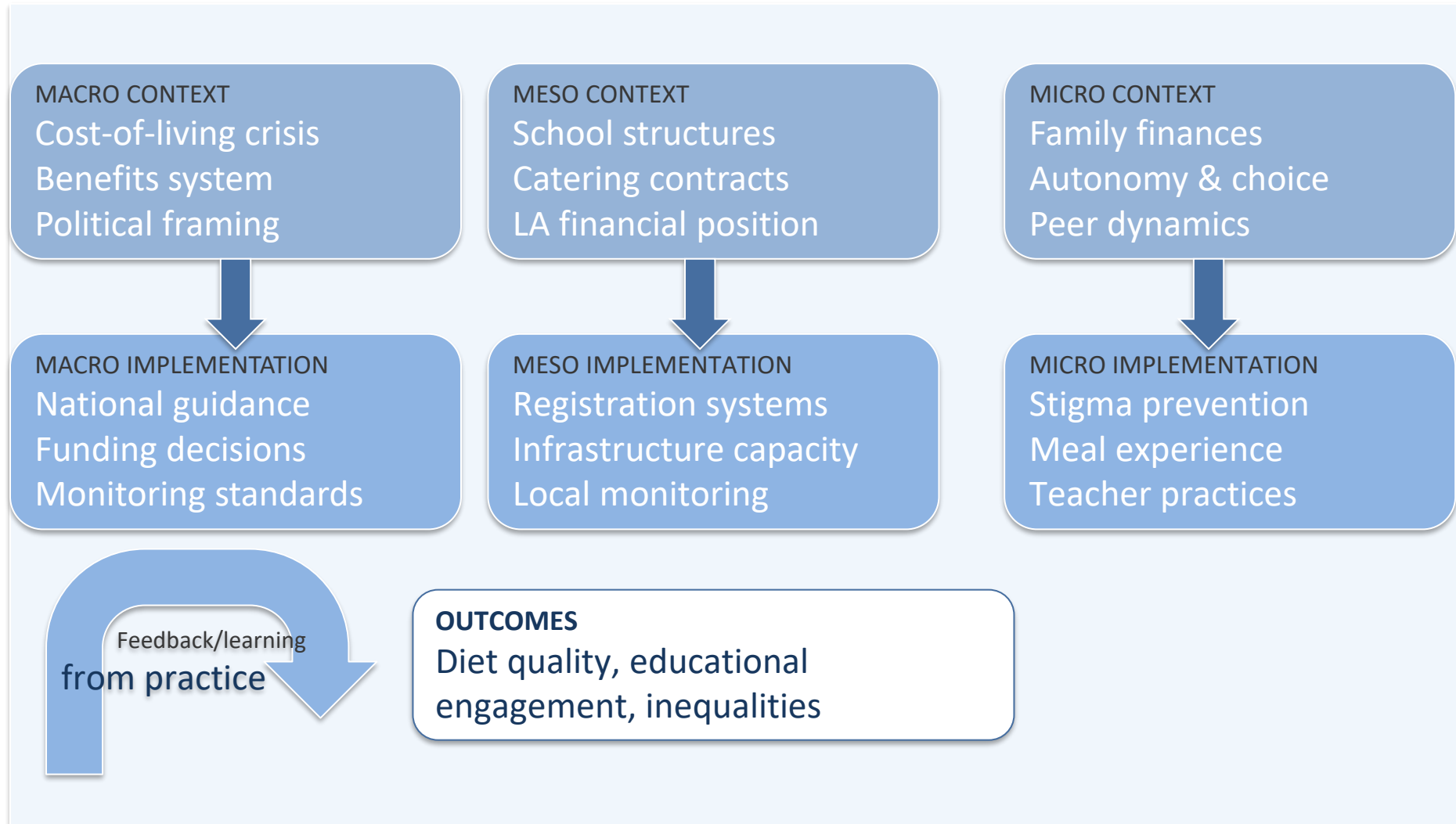
Integrated Implementation Recommendations

- **Macro**: fund capital upgrades and recurrent costs; align with benefits reform; strengthen monitoring (SFS) and guidance
- **Meso**: tailor delivery to school structures; improve data access for LAs; minimise burden on families
- **Micro**: embed stigma prevention in delivery; appoint food champions; adapt staffing and timetables; discretionary powers to avoid 'cliff edge'

- Across levels: pursue joined-up approach linking with food, education and social protection systems



Systems View: Context → Implementation → Outcomes



Conclusion

- Expanding eligibility is necessary but not sufficient
- Implementation success depends on alignment across macro, meso and micro levels
- Without sustainable funding and infrastructure support, expansion risks unintended consequences
- School meals are not a nutrition intervention but a systems intervention within the wider food system and social protection landscape



THANK YOU



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Transforming UK Food Systems Conference, 23-24 March 2026



#TUKFS26

