

Bath and North East Somerset Council - Full Council 21 November 2024

Labour Motion on Free School Meals Auto-enrolment Proposed by Lesley Mansell – seconded by Robin Moss

Council notes:

1. It's hard to concentrate, learn or interact when hungry – especially as a child.
2. Food insecurity impairs the growth of body and mind, as well as relationships. Such disadvantages can have lifelong impact.

Council welcomes the work of, amongst many others,

3. BNES' Director of Public Health, whose Annual Report (Sep '24) estimates 5% of our population, over 8,000 residents, sometimes or often don't have enough to eat,¹
4. The Trussell Trust, who say over 3,000 local children were supported by emergency food parcels last year,²
5. St John's Foundation, who are funding free school meals for 700 children in six local primary schools until July 2025, and B&NES Fair Food Alliance (BFFA), made up of over 60 organisations, who developed the 'B&NES food equity action plan 2022-25'.³

Council acknowledges that:

6. Free school meals (FSM) are government-funded, and administered by councils.
7. To qualify for FSM, a household's after-tax income must be below £7,400.
8. Estimates say FSM can save a hard-pressed family £1,400 a year. ⁴
9. For each FSM-registered child, a school gets pupil premium funding for wider support: £1,455 in primary schools; £1,035 in secondaries.

Council is concerned that:

10. The numbers of eligible children in BNES leapt by 27% between May '20-May '23.
11. This January, 17% of children in B&NES state schools (4,715) were eligible⁵ – nearly 2,500 were at primary school.⁶

¹ Annual report from the Director of Public Health - <https://www.bathnes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Director%20of%20Public%20Health%20Report%2023-24.pdf>

² Trussell Trust figs reported in The Journal - <https://www.mnrjournal.co.uk/news/number-of-food-bank-users-rises-by-22-in-bath-and-north-east-somerset-689511>

³ FFA action plan: <https://democracy.bathnes.gov.uk/documents/s71660/Appdx1%20Food%20Equity%20Action%20Plan%202022%20-%202025.pdf>

⁴ £1400 a year savings for a family - <https://policyinpractice.co.uk/tackling-child-hunger-by-auto-enrolment-in-free-school-meals/>

- *Unless where specifically set out in the statute, motions approved at Council do not bind the Executive (Cabinet) but may influence their future decisions.*
- *Councillors are reminded of their public sector equality duty which requires the Council to consider or think about how their policies or decisions may affect people who are protected under the Equality Act.*

12. Too many eligible families aren't claiming FSM because of administration, language, literacy issues and stigma.⁷

Council is alarmed that:

13. Across all age groups, the gap between the attainment of children on FSM and not in BNES is consistently larger than the gap across the rest of the country.

14. For 7-11 year-olds (key stage 2), the gap is the worst in the country⁸

15. For 0-5 year-olds, (early years foundation) BNES is the third worst in the country.

Council notes that

16. A large number of local authorities have introduced FSM auto-enrolment for eligible families – Sheffield, Lambeth, Wandsworth, Lewisham, Bedford, York, Coventry, to name a few.

17. Reported benefits include better health, concentration and achievement, and reductions in stigma, absence, and under-achievement. School funding increases and everyone gains from the benefits throughout the child's lifetime.⁹

And therefore resolves to:

18. Request Cabinet to prioritise and implement auto-enrolment to tackle the lack of take-up by eligible families across BNES before September 2025, learning from the work done by York University, FixOurFood, The Food Foundation and experienced local authorities.

19. Subject to Cabinet implementing FSM auto-enrolment then Council requests the Health and Wellbeing Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel receives and scrutinise progress updates from the auto-enrolment project when it considers children in February, April, and June 2025.

⁵ Director of Public Health report (ibid)

⁶ On both points 10 and 11, Health and Wellbeing Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel (PDS) 13 Nov '23 - <https://democracy.bathnes.gov.uk/documents/s79310/School%20Meals.pdf>

⁷ Food Foundation <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/press-release/outdated-opt-system-means-250000-children-missing-out-free-school-meals#>

⁸ PDS 11 March 2024: <https://democracy.bathnes.gov.uk/documents/s80776/Education%20Performance%202024.pdf>

⁹ PWC, quoted in House of Commons research paper. - <https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/westminster-hall-debate-provision-free-school-meals-7-may-2024>

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