

OPT-OUT AUTO-AWARD FOR FREE SCHOOL MEALS

Why school caterers should be thinking about auto-enrolment

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WHAT'S THE POLICY AND PRACTICE CONTEXT?



Councils across the UK are facing significant challenges in tackling **child poverty and food insecurity**.



Ensuring families can access the support they're entitled to isn't straightforward.



Currently, **families have to proactively apply for free school meals (FSM)**. In practice, they often don't.



This means that **too many children across the country are missing out** on a free nutritious meal. Schools are also missing out on additional Pupil Premium funding.

TO COMPLICATE MATTERS FURTHER...

There are two national policy changes coming into effect in September 2026. **Local authorities must be prepared:**

October '26 policy change	The details	The risk	Why this matters
Entitlement for FSM expands to all households receiving Universal Credit	The current £7,400 income cap is being removed, meaning anyone on UC will become eligible for FSM.	Thousands of working families on UC will become eligible overnight. Many will not realise they qualify and will not apply for FSM.	In both instances, many children will likely fall through the cracks and miss out on free school meals and additional funding for their school.
Transitional protection ends	The safety net that keeps children on FSM - even if parent/carer income increases - will be removed.	Families losing transitional protection may 'drop off' the scheme. They may become entitled under the new UC rule but not realise it.	

Auto-enrolment can help mitigate these risks by embedding a system that proactively identifies pupils who are entitled but not currently receiving FSM.

Councils should aim to have an auto-enrolment process in place no later than September 2026.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR CATERERS

Caterers work hard to make sure all their children are well fed

Financial pressures undermine capacity to deliver nutritious food



How can auto-enrolment help?

THE SOLUTION: OPT-OUT AUTO- AWARD

In a nutshell:

- Opt-out auto-award is a process that can help councils proactively identify pupils entitled to free school meals who aren't receiving them.
- It involves matching benefits and school census data to identify pupils who are entitled but not registered.
- Opt out and then send list to schools to register pupils

WHY THE CATERERS IN THIS ROOM STAND TO BENEFIT FROM AUTO-ENROLMENT

Increase in FSM funding

Increased economies of scale

Strengthened local school food economy

IS YOUR COUNCIL RUNNING AUTO- ENROLMENT?

- > If yes, could more be done to identify and register more pupils?
- > If not, do you know who to speak to about initiating this process?

HOW WE WORK WITH COUNCILS

- We've worked with **six local authorities** to establish and embed a clear and effective process so that it is easy to implement each census round.
- We are currently working with a **seventh local authority** to implement auto-enrolment by the May 2026 census. This will be the **third two-tier/county council** we've supported through the process.
- We've also worked on a **regional level**, supporting London boroughs with dedicated **implementation and impact monitoring support**.
- The Bremner & Co team are also tapped into the wider school food conversation.

OUR IMPACT SO FAR: DEVON COUNTY COUNCIL CASE STUDY

- In October 2025, we supported Devon County Council to successfully implement an auto-enrolment process for free school meals.
- The process led to an increase of **1,064 pupils** registered to receive a free school meal, **boosting economies of scale**
- This **unlocked £450,000 in FSM grants**, and £1.4 million in Pupil Premium funding for schools.



The image shows a screenshot of the BBC News website. The top navigation bar includes the BBC logo, a 'For you' button, a bell icon for notifications, and links to Home, News, Sport, Weather, and iPlayer. Below the navigation is a red header bar with the word 'NEWS' in white. Underneath the header, a sub-navigation bar lists: Home, InDepth, Israel-Gaza war, War in Ukraine, Climate, UK, World, Business, Politics, and Culture. The 'UK' link is underlined. Below this, a link to 'England | Local News' is shown. The main content area features a large, bold headline: 'Free school meals for 1,300 more children in Devon'. Below the headline is a photograph of a school meal tray on a metal tray, containing a variety of food items like broccoli, carrots, and a blue plastic cup.

WHAT ARE THE SECONDARY BENEFITS COUNCILS ARE SEEING?

Reductions in inequalities

Strengthened relationships with schools

Integrated working across teams

Improved data systems and management

Better understanding of local demographics and deprivation.

AND BREMNER & CO ARE TAPPED INTO THE SCHOOL FOOD CONVERSATION



Questions?

Questions? Get in touch with the team:

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