

DE/2026-025 – Freedom of Information Request

Request:

Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 I would like to request the following information:

The data sets and financial modelling, including the projected numbers of children supported and projected costs, which underpinned the options considered in the review of the provision of free school meals.

It is expected that as a minimum this modelling includes the following data for the 2024/2025 and 2025/2026 school years.

- The number of households in Northern Ireland entitled to Free School Meals under the **current eligibility criteria**.
- The number of children in Northern Ireland entitled to Free School Meals under the current eligibility criteria.
- The profile of these children by school year and/or key stage including EYFS (i.e. what % are foundation, what % are key stage 1 etc)?
- The council area these children reside in.

- The number of households which would be entitled to Free School Meals **if all households in receipt of universal credit** were entitled to FSM
- The number of children who would be entitled to FSM if all households in receipt of universal credit were entitled to FSM
- The profile of these children by school year and/or key stage including EYFS
- The council area these children reside in.

- The number of households in Northern Ireland which are **in poverty**
- The number of children in Northern Ireland who live in households which are **in poverty**

- The projected cost of FSM provision at a 100%, 95%, 90%, 85% and 80% uptake for all options considered including:
 - Universal provision
 - Provision to all households in receipt of Universal Credit
 - Provision to all households in poverty

Department Response:

Thank you for your request for information relating to modelling used to inform the Department's review of the eligibility for free school meals (FSM). The request was received on 12 February 2026, and the Department is dealing with it under the terms of the above legislation.

Your request sought information covering the 2024/2025 and 2025/2026 academic years.

Your request has a number of parts to it, shown below in italics. The Department's response is provided below each part of the request.

- *The number of households in Northern Ireland entitled to FSM under the current eligibility criteria.*

The Departmental modelling was based on the number of children and information on the number of households is not held by the Department.

- *The number of children in Northern Ireland entitled to FSM under the current eligibility criteria.*

In 2024/25, the number of full-time pupils in Northern Ireland who were entitled to FSM, under the eligibility criteria that applied during that academic year, when the FSM income threshold for those in receipt of Universal Credit was £15,000 per annum, was 89,918. This was based upon the Department's school census data.

In 2025/26, the number of full-time pupils in Northern Ireland projected in the Departmental modelling to be entitled to FSM, under the eligibility criteria that applied at during that academic year, when the FSM income threshold for those in receipt of Universal Credit was £15,390 per annum, was 86,284.

- *The profile of these children by school year and/or key stage including EYFS (i.e. what % are foundation, what % are key stage 1 etc)?*

The Department does not hold the information in the form you have requested. The modelling for pupils in full-time education was broken down by the following school phases: pre-school, primary and preparatory, post-primary and special. This breakdown for actual entitlement in 2024/25 (as per the DE school census) is shown in Tab 1 of the enclosed spreadsheet.

This breakdown as modelled for the 2025/26 academic year, broken down by school phase, is shown in Tab 2 of the enclosed spreadsheet.

- *The council area these children reside in.*

The Department does not hold this data as the modelling was at Northern Ireland level.

- *The number of households which would be entitled to Free School Meals if all households in receipt of universal credit were entitled to FSM*

The Departmental modelling was based on the number of children and information on the number of households is not held by the Department.

- *The number of children who would be entitled to FSM if all households in receipt of universal credit were entitled to FSM*

The Departmental modelling projected that 134,311 full-time pupils would be entitled to FSM in 2024/25 if no income threshold were applied to those in receipt of Universal Credit.

The Departmental modelling projected that 130,789 full-time pupils would be entitled to FSM in 2025/26 if no income threshold were applied to those in receipt of Universal Credit.

- *The profile of these children by school year and/or key stage including EYFS*

In respect of 2024/25, the Department does not hold information breaking down the 134,311 figure.

In respect of 2025/26, the Department does not hold the information in the form you have requested. The modelling for pupils in full-time education was broken down by the following school phases: pre-school, primary and preparatory, post-primary and special. This breakdown is shown for projected entitlement to FSM in 2025/26 in Tab 3 of the enclosed spreadsheet.

- *The council area these children reside in.*

The Department does not hold this data as the modelling was at Northern Ireland level.

- *The number of households in Northern Ireland which are **in poverty***

The Department does not hold this data.

- *The number of children in Northern who live in households which are **in poverty***

The Department does not hold this data.

- *The projected cost of FSM provision at a 100%, 95%, 90%, 85% and 80% uptake for all options considered including:*
 - *Universal provision*
 - *Provision to all households in receipt of Universal Credit*
 - *Provision to all households in poverty*

Informed by the Department's [School Meals Statistical Bulletin 2024/25](#), modelling for all options assumed an 85% uptake level for school meals in pre-schools, primary and preparatory schools and special schools. It assumed an 80% uptake level for post-primary schools. Modelling at other uptake levels is therefore not held by the Department.

Cost estimates are provided below for each option considered, based upon projected FSM entitlement levels in 2025/26. References to an "unchanged income threshold" refers to a net household earnings threshold of £15,000 per annum. Additional cost estimates are based upon the additional annual revenue cost anticipated in 2025/26 at the then £15,000 household net earnings threshold – this benchmarks additional cost estimates against the estimated costs if the income threshold had remained unchanged at £15,000 in 2025/26. The cost estimates do not include capital costs associated with any expansion of catering/dining facilities that would be required under some options. Cost estimates also include projected lost income from pupils who would have previously paid for a meal who would be able to access the meal for free under each option. Cost inflation is not taken into account. Due to the scale of the increases, the modelling

assumes only estimated additional food costs would be applied for those gaining entitlement to FSM, whereas the estimated additional costs for those gaining access to a universal FSM would also include staffing, transport and utility costs.

Options	Projected additional annual resource cost
Universal FSM for pupils from nursery to P3 and unchanged income threshold on the eligibility criteria for all pupils	£36.4m*
Universal FSM for full-time pupils in nursery to P7 and unchanged income threshold on the eligibility criteria for all pupils	£81.0m*
Universal FSM for full-time pupils in nursery to Year 14 and unchanged income threshold on the eligibility criteria for all pupils	£142.2m*
Raising income thresholds on eligibility criteria for all pupils only	See Tab 4 of spreadsheet
Universal FSM for pupils from nursery to P3 and raising income thresholds on the eligibility criteria for all pupils	See Tab 4 of spreadsheet
Universal FSM for pupils from nursery to P7 and raising income thresholds on the eligibility criteria for all pupils	See Tab 4 of spreadsheet
2024/25 Income threshold uprated by Consumer Price Index	£0.4m
Maintain 2024/25 FSM pupil numbers in 2025/26	£1.6m
Maintain proportion of F/T pupils entitled before Move to UC in 2023/24	£2.8m
Align income threshold with absolute poverty threshold ¹ for a single person with 2 school aged children (£19,820)	£5.1m
Align income threshold with absolute poverty threshold ¹ identified by DfC for couple with 2 school aged children (£26,760)	£12.1m
Removal of income threshold that applies to those in receipt of Universal Credit	£24.2m*

It should be noted that the modelling that was undertaken by the Department necessitated a number of assumptions being made. The modelling was most recently updated in March 2025 and used the data that was available to the Department at that time. It should also be noted that the Department uses the term “entitled” to FSM to mean the number of pupils that are projected to have successfully applied for FSM.

¹ Poverty thresholds taken from DfC data published on 27 March 2025 - [Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality report 2023-24](#). These thresholds were after housing costs, including benefits income.

* Due to the scale of the additional number of meals involved, these options apply the full cost of production to those accessing a universal FSM and all pupils in the final option in the table above.