

Eligibility for free school meals and the early years pupil premium under Universal Credit

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents nearly 19,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary phase. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.

- 2 ASCL welcomes the review of eligibility criteria for free school meals (FSM) and early years pupil premium. ASCL members are committed to the national social mobility agenda and it is clear that there is still much work to be done to close the attainment gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their wealthier peers. Research by EPI¹ indicates that

'persistently disadvantaged pupils end primary school over a year behind their non-disadvantaged peers and are over two years behind by the end of secondary school.'

We believe that schools and colleges cannot do this alone and that we need joined up social policies which effectively tackle poverty.

- 3 It is encouraging to see that overall more of the most disadvantaged low-income households would qualify for FSM under these proposals. This would have a positive effect on school revenue budgets and both schools and early year's pupil premium grant income. It is important that the sector can be reassured that the increase in eligibility will not have a diluting effect on the amount per pupil available for distribution via the pupil premium grant for example. We would welcome any assurance that can be given in this regard.

- 4 ASCL welcomes the DfE commitment to put financial support in place for schools required to provide a greater number of free school meals as a result of changes to the eligibility criteria. We are keen to understand in more detail how this will work and when funding will become available.

- 5 However, we are disappointed that the proposals do not remove the need for eligible families to apply separately for FSM when their eligibility is known at national and local level. We would be keen to understand in more detail why this is the case, and if it were a legislative issue, to know that the DfE would continue to pursue the necessary legal change. We think this would be sensible and reflect a real commitment to addressing social mobility on a national scale and workload issues at local level.

¹ <https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/closing-the-gap-web.pdf>

With reference to your specific questions

Question 1: Do you agree with proposed net earnings threshold to determine eligibility for free school meals and the early years pupil premium under Universal Credit?

- 6 It makes sense that eligibility criteria are focused on earnings rather than hours worked and that there should be a net earnings threshold.
- 7 We are not sure that £7400 is the right threshold and would be keen to understand the methodology behind this figure. Our calculations suggest that a single parent, paid at the national living wage would lose their eligibility for FSM if they worked over 18 hours per week.
- 8 Living wage (25 year old) from April 2018 = £7.83 per hour
- 18 hours per week = £7,329 per year
19 hours per week = £7,736 per year
- 9 We think a net earnings threshold of £10000 should be considered. This would support eligibility for a single parent, paid at the national living wage working up to 25 hours per week.
- 25 hours per week = £10,179 - £200 NI = £9,979
- 10 Information from The Children's Society² indicates that the proposals will fail to reach one million children in poverty. Increasing the net income threshold would reduce this number.

Question 2: Do you agree with proposed protections?

- 11 We agree that entitlement should be protected during the Universal Credit (UC) rollout period and that children who would not be eligible for FSM under the new proposals do not have their entitlement withdrawn in April 2018.
- 12 However we do not think that blanket protection to the end of phase is equitable.
- 13 This will result in a significant variance in the value of the benefit received.
- Child A in yr 5 would continue to receive FSM for a further one year
 - Child B in yr 7 would continue to receive FSM for a further four years
- 14 We would ask the DfE to consider a fixed period of protection of two years following a change in eligibility as a result of the roll out of UC. We think that this would be a reasonable adjustment period for families and would limit the impact of flux on the disadvantaged population. See paragraphs 16-18 below.

² <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/news-and-blogs/press-releases/universal-credit-one-million-children-in-poverty-to-miss-out-on-free>

Question 3: Will proposals have an adverse effect on any children with one or more protected characteristics outlined in the Equality Act 2010?

- 15 We believe that children with protected characteristics will not be adversely affected.

Question 4: Do you have any views on the proposed management of changes to disadvantage measures or on the metrics we publish for the measurement of disadvantaged pupil's performance?

- 16 We appreciate the opportunity to contribute and share our views on what the impact of these proposals might be on disadvantage measures and how they are used and interpreted. It is reassuring to note that the consultation acknowledges that there is a risk of severe instability to the disadvantage data collected via the FSM and Ever6 data both during the period of UC rollout and beyond.
- 17 In accountability terms disadvantage covers a broad range of factors and is already complex. First and foremost we must be assured that school leaders and outside agencies take a more pragmatic view and consider disadvantage as data source with multiple variables.
- 18 The 'disadvantage population' will be in flux and year on year comparisons will not be reliable. This will be exacerbated during the period of rollout of UC as schools in different parts of the country experience changes in the disadvantage population at different times, meaning that comparisons with similar schools would also be challenged; the group of similar schools needing to change to reflect impact of UC as it rolls out over time.
- 19 We would question the premise that headline performance measures will be unaffected. For example the transitional position which allows all families in receipt of UC to claim FSM entitlement would suggest that more pupils with higher prior attainment would be classed as disadvantaged.
- 20 We would suggest that the DfE statistical methodology group be involved to scope the potential problems in measuring the performance of disadvantaged pupils that could emerge as a result of the population flux.
- 21 We would recommend that such investigations be the subject of a supplementary consultation, accepting that this will run on after the implementation of changes to FSM eligibility criteria. ASCL would urge the group to specifically consider the points in 22 to 24 below.
- 22 Maintaining a shadow data set that assesses the impact on the disadvantaged population of those pupils who became eligible for FSM during the transitional period, but would not be eligible after April 2018. The clear objective being to dampen the impact of transitional flux.
- 23 Would the revised criteria for FSM eligibility pick up pupils who had previously been captured as Ever6 but due to a small change in family circumstances had become ineligible for FSM? It is our view that if this were to be the case it would indicate success in terms of reaching pupils marginalised by a change in family circumstances that may not have been material in addressing social mobility.
- 24 What are the cliff edges and how would the proposals address them? For example under the current criteria a child who becomes eligible for free school meals in April would not attract Pupil Premium grant funding until the following financial year.

Conclusion

- 25 It is ASCL's view that this consultation presents a significant opportunity to contribute to the wider policy issues of social mobility and specifically to reach children in poverty.
- 26 I hope that this is of value to your consultation, ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

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8 January 2018